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Gender Equality in Appointments of Board Members: The Role of Multiple Actors and their Dynamics

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Prior research has demonstrated the role of gender in recruitment and selection processes. We contribute to this literature by moving beyond studying persisting barriers for women and exploring collective practices that can contribute to gender equality. Drawing on in-depth case studies of recent appointments to corporate boards in the Netherlands, we examine the role of multiple actors and their collective strategies and dynamic interactions. This way, we provide a better understanding of the possibilities of multiple actors to bring about change or reinforce the status quo. Our findings reveal, first, that a group of ‘moderate change agents’ are crucial for outcomes of appointment procedures. Second, we identify three practices of coalitions of change agents that further the change agenda: seeking support, mobilizing moderate actors and counterbalancing routines. Our results suggest that if frontrunners receive support from and mobilize moderate change agents, routine gender practices can successfully be challenged and countered, as moderates give support and legitimacy to more radical actors and can bridge the gap between the latter and resisters.

Keywords: gender equality; change agents; recruitment and selection; organizational change; senior executive selection; women on boards; case study research

Introduction

Despite a plethora of organizational and legislative measures (Terjesen *et al.*, 2015; Terjesen and Sealy, 2016), women remain underrepresented in the top echelons of organizations. To understand this persistent under-representation, literature on gender in recruitment and selection has examined the gender practices that keep gender inequality in management and senior management in place. Scholars have pointed to mechanisms such as homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977; Holgersson, 2013), informal networks of communication (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2014; Dennissen *et al.*, 2019) and cloning behaviour (Essed, 2004) to argue that evaluators tend to go for candidates that are similar to them. Other studies have focused on preconceptions and stereotyping of women, which hold women back from powerful positions in organizations (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman *et al.*,

2015). Relatedly, studies have given valuable insights in the way evaluators reproduce particular understandings of the ‘ideal’ managerial body that disadvantages women, ethnic minorities, and non-hegemonic men (Holgersson *et al.*, 2016; Meriläinen *et al.*, 2015; Tienari *et al.*, 2013). Whereas our knowledge about how organizations reproduce gender inequalities in senior positions is quite extensive, much less is known about how to reduce these inequalities effectively. The question remains, how can we challenge the deep-rooted gender inequality practices that are taken for granted and that impede women from taking up senior positions?

In this paper, we move beyond studying persisting barriers for women in recruitment and selection and explore actors and their practices that can contribute to increasing the share of women in senior positions, particularly in board positions. Several authors have recently drawn attention to the fact that there is still no closer examination of the role of actors driving this change in recruitment and selection (Doldor *et al.*, 2016; Kelan and Wratil, 2018; Seierstad *et al.*, 2017). Although there are some studies that focus on single actors, such as

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headhunters, diversity professionals or CEOs, there are multiple actors engaged in organizational decision making such as recruiting and selecting new board members (Khurana, 2002; Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, Doldor *et al.* (2016, p. 299) have argued that research would ‘benefit from a more distributed perspective on change agency’ to explore how ‘coalitions of more or less committed actors’ may contribute to change. We answer this call by examining the different actors who create or impede change towards gender equality in the recruitment and selection of corporate board members and explore what motivates them, which strategies they use and how they interact.

This study is based on in-depth case studies of recent appointments to executive boards and supervisory boards in the Dutch business world. Our analysis is based on qualitative material collected through semi-structured interviews. Our research adds to the existing literature on gender practices in recruitment and selection by showing how different internal and external decision makers contribute collectively to gender/equality in recruitment and selection practices. By applying an integrated framework of several actors, we provide a more encompassing and theoretically richer picture of the dynamics between key actors in appointing women on boards.

Gender practices in recruitment and selection

Recruitment and selection is a crucial field of interest in the search for explanations for the under-representation of women in top positions (Holgersson, 2013; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2016; Tienari *et al.*, 2013; Kirsch, 2018). The explanation is often sought in image formation and gender stereotypes in organizations that influence recruitment and selection (Heilman *et al.*, 2015). Many studies show that the qualities of women are less self-evident than the qualities of men (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011), as the image of the ideal leader or manager is still rather masculine (McCabe and Knights, 2016; Sinclair, 2009; McCabe and Knights, 2016). Of the top corporate positions, the highest positions are almost exclusively taken up by men (e.g., Luckerath-Rovers, 2016) and this affects the image formation of these positions and of the possible candidates for these positions. This image formation plays a crucial role in the various stages of the recruitment and selection process (for example in the profile and criteria for members that are to be appointed). Stereotyped views of executives and board members are perpetuated through masculine senior management cultures and assessments that are based on traditional career models (Fawcett and Pringle, 2000).

Furthermore, informal networks and executive search consultants (or headhunters) play an important role in the under-representation of women in senior positions (Holgersson, 2013; Meriläinen *et al.*, 2015; Doldor *et al.*, 2016). Headhunters help corporate decision makers to identify, evaluate and select competent and suitable people for their top positions. Tienari *et al.* (2013) identify how gender is practiced and women are excluded during these processes. Categorical assumptions about men and women are reiterated, an ‘ideal’ candidate is defined as male, practices of executive search remain gendered and the dominant position of a particular type of man in the top echelons of organizations is perpetuated. The authors argue that unmasking how gender is interwoven into the executive search process may provide openings for ‘doing’ gender differently. This implies that we need more knowledge on the roles that change agents can have in challenging systems and structures to improve gender equality, which is hitherto less developed (Kelan and Wratil, 2018). Therefore, we will move beyond studying persisting barriers for women and explore practices that contribute to increasing the share of women in senior positions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of multiple actors to create inclusive and gender-equal organizations.

To do so, we specifically build on prior studies in the field of gender in organizations, and particularly on studies which explore the role of actors in processes to increase women in senior positions. These actor-focused perspectives are important in understanding the unfolding of institutional change processes (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). Rather than seeing organizational change as orchestrated from the top, we agree with Orlikowski (1996, p. 622) who sees it as ‘grounded in the ongoing practices of organizational actors, and [emerging] out of their (tacit and not so tacit) accommodations to and experiments with the everyday’. Seierstad *et al.* (2017) examined the critical actors who drive and determine national public policies to increase the number of women on boards, and what motivates them to push for gender quota. They mapped the political games, including micropolitics, amongst various actors and groups. As the article mainly focused on the spread of national public policies, it therefore provides no insights in the micro practices of actors in organizational recruitment and selection. In a recent study, Kelan and Wratil (2018) focused on the role of CEOs in bringing about gender equality in organizations by practices of accountability, building ownership, communicating, leading by example, initiating and driving culture change. The authors do not address the role of CEOs in recruitment and selection explicitly, but it becomes clear that CEOs have an important role to play in changing gender norms in organizations. Lastly, we build on the work of Doldor *et al.* (2016) who examined the role of headhunters as actors in a broader institutional

change process, aiming to increase gender diversity on corporate boards. The authors show that actors who operate from outside the organization and take on diversity as a marginal part of their remit utilise different motivations and strategies. These actors have no explicit commitment to diversity, but they engage in equality work because of 'lucrative opportunities' or 'fashionable debates'. 'As reactive players and not strategic instigators of change', headhunters were not compelled to explain why it is desirable to have more [women on boards] WoB, but rather how their profession might contribute to this agenda' (Doldor *et al.*, 2016, p. 298). They reproduce the discourses and logics of those who drive equality from the front.

We will extend these works by not only showing the potential change agency of single actors such as CEOs or headhunters but exploring the role of several different internal and external actors who play a role in recruitment and selection of board members and the *dynamics* among these different decision makers. Hitherto, scholarship on gender in recruitment and selection has largely focused on single actors, unpacking the discourses and strategies they use to legitimize and implement gender and diversity initiatives. Although scholarship is progressing towards a more nuanced understanding of the change work undertaken by multiple actors engaged in gender equality work, there is limited insight into the dynamics between internal and external actors (Van den Brink 2018). Multiple actors are engaged in organizational decision making such as recruiting and selecting new board members (Khurana, 2002; Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, we need more insights into collective decision-making processes, organizational (micro) politics and its gendered effects (Martin, 2006). Recruiting and selecting is not simply a technical endeavor which involves judging which candidates are the best. It is, equally, a political endeavor involving negotiations between multiple actors. By addressing the dynamic relationships and interactions between several actors we are able to see how fossilized gender stereotypes and practices can be changed. In addition, this study will benefit from not only taking into account the potential change agents, but also possible counterforces that mitigate or resist change. We argue that we need to study the dynamics between all actors and decision makers to understand how change comes about or is impeded.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative case study approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) to capture the dynamics of multiple actors involved in the recruitment and selection of board members. To select cases of board appointments, we contacted companies in the Netherlands which had

recently (i.e. in 2015 or 2016) appointed one or more new board members. We approached 137 companies that met these criteria and 11 replied positively. Altogether, we reconstructed 12 cases (appointments) in 11 companies. Companies in the Netherlands use a two-tier board model: the executive board and the supervisory board. We studied six appointments of members of executive boards and six of members of supervisory boards. The Dutch Corporate Governance Code requires of large companies that their corporate boards (the executive and supervisory boards) comprise at least 30% women and 30% men. This code applies has been enacted for a limited period of time, that is, from 2013 until 2020 and only applies to publicly traded companies and on a 'comply or explain' basis (Diepeveen *et al.*, 2017). The code has direct relevance to some but not all of the organizations in our study, as not all of them are publicly traded.

Data collection took place during the summer and autumn of 2016. Interviews formed the main data source, and documents such as search profiles, year reports, and regarding diversity and human resource policies were used for background information. Because our general goal initially was to understand how and by whom important decisions were made in the recruitment and selection of board members, we interviewed several key decision makers for each appointment. Per case, we spoke to up to four actors who were involved in recruitment and selection decisions. These decision makers were mostly members of executive and supervisory boards and, depending on the case, a headhunter, the successful candidate and members of advisory boards (e.g. works councils) or HR managers. In total, we interviewed 29 decision makers, 19 men and 10 women. Interviewees were asked to identify important moments during the various sub-stages of the recruitment and selection procedure, the actors involved at these moments, what their role was and which arguments were used. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were recorded and fully transcribed. To validate the transcribed text, the interviews were sent back to the respondents for verification.

We employed the technique of content analysis to analyse the interview data (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998), which enabled us to reveal the different experiences of and views on the recruitment and selection process. The first round of analysis revealed the crucial decisions during the process, such as regarding the job profile, which executive search agency was hired, which selection criteria were outlined, who was longlisted and shortlisted, and who was interviewed. After identifying important decisions in these 12 cases, we became interested in how different actors and the dynamics between them affected whether or not a woman was appointed. Therefore, we started to search for motives of actors to push for or resist the appointment of women on boards, which strategies they

employed, their actions and interactions with others during the recruitment and selection process. To make sense of our data we went back to the literature on change agency, organizational change and (gender in) recruitment. This abductive reasoning, moving back and forth between theory and empirical material (Van Maanen *et al.*, 2007) resulted in the identification of four different actor types: champions of gender equality, tempered radicals, moderate change agents and implicit resisters.

To be able to provide an in-depth account of the role of and dynamics between different types of actors, we describe two of our 12 cases in detail to illustrate our arguments. We chose these two cases because they are particularly suitable to illuminate the dynamics of actors in countering (or reproducing) gender inequality practices in the recruitment and selection of women board members. Specifically, in these cases: (1) women board members were appointed; and (2) several different types of actors were interviewed and rich information on their interactions was available (Table 1 presents the interviewees for these cases). While we draw mostly on these two cases to elucidate our argumentation regarding how different actors and their interactions can affect appointments of woman board members, our conclusions are also based on the findings from the other 10 cases we studied (Table 2 shows illustrative supporting quotes from these cases).

Findings: collaborative practices

Below, we briefly introduce each case and then discuss our findings regarding the different actors involved, their motives and strategies, and the dynamics between them.

Case 1: real estate

Case 1 concerns the appointment of an executive board member in the real estate sector. This company with 400 employees is led by an executive board consisting of three members (prior to this appointment: one woman, two men) and a supervisory board with six members (three women, three men). An executive board seat became vacant after the previous CEO had stepped down, and

another member of the executive board was appointed to that position, leaving one other seat open.

The most important actors were three supervisory board members who formed the selection committee, the CEO and a headhunter. The key interactions were between these actors, while the other members of the supervisory and executive boards were involved more indirectly. Among the actors who acted as change agents, some fulfilled a leading role by initiating the discussion about aiming to appoint a woman. This is evident, for example, when the CEO – Helen – described what happened when a first version of the job profile was discussed with the supervisory board:

I wrote the job profile which was discussed in the supervisory board. Our supervisory board consists of fifty% women, fifty% men. There are women who consider this very important – that you must give preference to women in recruitment procedures. And I believe this too. There's a lack of women in top positions. I think it's a good thing that the board members are explicit about this. I can only encourage this. [...] And Mieke who is on our supervisory board said: we are just going to go for a woman, it has to be a woman. (Helen)

The quote illuminates three crucial aspects of this case. First, certain change agents acted as frontrunners, who initiated the change process by starting the conversation about striving to appoint a woman. Helen was one of these frontrunners; she wrote the first version of the job profile and included the statement that a woman would be preferred in the case of equally suitable candidates. Helen's account also identifies women on the supervisory board as frontrunners. The latter used the meeting with the supervisory board to voice their own – more unambiguously phrased – preference for appointing a woman. Second, this quote illuminates these frontrunners' motivations. Helen describes the other frontrunners and herself as like-minded actors, who believe that priority should be given to women candidates in recruitment and selection procedures (in general), mentioning concerns about the underrepresentation of women on boards (WoB) as a reason. Third, the quote above illustrates that the interactions between these frontrunners played a vital role in this appointment procedure. The women on the

Table 1 Interviewees in two selected cases

Case	Name	Gender	Position	Type of actor
1	Robert	Male	Chair supervisory board	Moderate change agent
	Helen	Female	CEO	Champion
	Marianne	Female	Headhunter	Implicit resister
2	Herman	Male	Chair supervisory board	Moderate change agent
	Karel	Male	Chair advisory board	Moderate change agent
	Ted	Male	Headhunter	Moderate change agent
	Fiona	Female	Appointed board member	Champion (other procedures)

Table 2 Types of actors and quotes other cases

<i>Type of actor</i>		<i>Quotes</i>
Frontrunners	Champions of gender equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And then I was even confronted by the fact that the search agency in question said that they knew the market and that there were no women who could do this. I mean, this got so out of hand that I said, 'Then that means we have to switch to a different search agency'. [...] You can see that the selection committee really tends to go for what they're already familiar with. And so then you explicitly have to say, 'Wait a minute. What did we agree on together?' • And then in a later phase see how the interviews went. Who were the candidates? Could I please see the list? Why was this candidate rejected? What did you pay attention to? What were actually the criteria? And sometimes things are just crazy. [...] So then you have to stop again and ask what's going on. Would you have talked about a man like that? You have to fight. • Because I was clearly a proponent, I said, 'Let's first interview the women on the shortlist. If we can't find a suitable candidate, then we can invite a man'. • If you are really searching for a woman because of the composition of the team, then you'll find one. That woman might have less experience in specific elements, but that's okay.
	Tempered radicals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm really working on this, but I don't talk about it with them because then the discussions with men get complicated. I just suggest the names of more women. And I personally coach all of the women. But those guys don't know that. • It depends a bit on the exact search, but we always tell them that, and in some searches we even say: we want women, bring up women, we want women. Then we get women on the list and then – it's also harder for them, we know, but it forces them to work on it – and then eventually they bring them, and then if we're lucky we can pick one from there. • You have to use positive discrimination and, if a woman is almost suitable, support her. • I also have my own network of top women that I consult if I think that there are too few women on my list. I ask them whom I might have overlooked.
	Moderate agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's not as if we've never had a woman on the board. But it's not a must. But the diversity is good. Because you can see that this leads to a different point of view. So it does add something, but it's not really policy. It's not as if a woman has to be selected for a certain position, it's more important that there's a click, especially with the CEO. • [about (why an advocate of) gender diversity on boards] 'I think it brings much more balance to your company. And, to put it simply, I think women are a lot sharper than men. Women that you work with at your own level are more willing to get to the heart of the matter, they dare to show their emotions. At least that's my opinion. And in my experience, they're more open and less politically oriented than men. And I think you get results faster when you work with women. If I go to a pitch with a woman and we've prepared it well, she gets more results than if I go with a male colleague. Men tend to talk in circles. Often a bit too friendly. So I really believe that having women at the top of your company will help you to change your company and organise faster. • I think that ambition is an important aspect when you're talking about people's availability. Men are generally more power-hungry than women.
	Implicit resisters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the discussion, the best candidates should rise to the top. No positive discrimination. We've said, 'Listen, we definitely prefer a woman, but she has to meet the criteria'. • I'm willing to bet that there just aren't enough women. And the reason for this is this absurd part-time culture we have here in the Netherlands. • A lot of things happen through informal channels. We did, eventually, have a top executive bureau take a look, but everyone was convinced that it was a good fit. So yes, that's how things go. • And even though it's unintentional, a regular shortcoming is concentrating too much on your own internal networks when you're making a list of potential candidates. So when men do this, there's a very big chance that the list will contain mostly men.

supervisory board did more than endorsing the goal Helen set; they strengthened it by articulating the aim of appointing a woman in much more explicit words. They did so when other supervisory board members were also present and the use of 'we' here suggests that this served to convince or inspire other actors. Helen expresses appreciation of the fact that these supervisory board members vocalized their concern about female board representation and desire to appoint a woman, stating that she 'can only encourage that'. Hence, mutual recognition of shared concerns and beliefs amongst the frontrunners appears to have reinforced these actors' aspirations to appoint a woman, and discussing the ambition to do so with other actors seems to have served to engage and mobilize other actors and to make the shared aim clearer.

Providing more insight into the motivation of the frontrunners, Helen recounted several examples of gender practices she had witnessed in recruitment and selection procedures she was involved in during her career:

I worked in a different organization and there were two male board members, somewhat old school. I was always the only female board member. Once we were looking to appoint another board member. [...] There was a very good young woman among the candidates and they started asking her all kinds of questions. Do you have children? Yes. And you will really have to work 24/7 and so on. [...] Then the next candidate was a man. And they didn't ask him the same questions. But I could see from his CV that he had children. So I

say, goodness, I see you've got two children, how are you going to manage? [...] Just to show how stupid it was. So stupid. [...] And I think that this didn't happen here, because we had all of these women on the committee. (Helen)

Helen's choice of words reveals that she recognized gender practices in the selection process and considered them unjust and frustrating. Given her senior position, her leading role in the change process – setting it in motion – and given her motives for doing so, Helen fits the profile of what has been described in the literature as a *gender equality champion* (Wahl, 2014; de Vries, 2015; Kelan and Wratil, 2018).

The next quote is another example of the solidarity and cooperation between Helen and the women on the selection committee, this time in doing things differently when interviewing candidates:

We were different, I think, also towards men and women, different in the questions we asked. [...] Robert said at times, wow, this is all going too fast for me. So he was like: I'm sitting here in the middle of all this female power. And these were of course the women who were on the committee: Mieke and Anne. (Helen)

Considering their preference to appoint a woman and motives for wanting to do so, and given their strategy – supporting and reaffirming Helen's initiative and convincing and mobilizing other actors – the women on the supervisory board can be understood as *tempered radicals* (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

Importantly, the quote above also illustrates that Helen did not depict Robert, the chair of the supervisory board, nor the other men on the company's boards as frontrunners in the change process. Nothing indicates that these men opposed the frontrunners (champions and tempered radicals). In fact, the 'we' in this quote appears to include Robert. Yet, it also suggests that he did not take a leading role. Despite not taking a leading role in the change process, we observed that the male board members did agree and cooperate with the frontrunners. All key actors spoke about crucial decisions during the recruitment and selection process as resulting from consensus amongst those involved, not just the selection committee and CEO, but also the other supervisory and executive board members, who were involved in the background. The supervisory board chair explained, for example, that they all fully supported the job profile mentioning the preference for a woman. The quote below, describing the choice for an executive search agency, forms another example:

But because we were really looking for women we said, well let's use an agency with a good network that can identify the kind of woman we want. (Robert)

Robert talks about 'we', making no distinction here between actors who were more or less in favor of choosing an agency that has the reputation of being able to find suitable women candidates. The next quote provides another illustration:

I had a clear preference for her [the successful candidate], but I thought, I won't start shouting about it. But then it was actually already done. They said: well, that's clear, right? And then Barbara [the successful candidate] was mentioned. I said: I completely agree. Also Bram, my colleague [executive board member] agreed, because I kept him informed, obviously (Helen).

Here, Helen describes what happened when she and the selection committee members discussed the candidates. There was a high level of agreement and cooperation between the frontrunners and other board members, this time during the selection phase. Hence, the male board members in this organization – in particular the male chair of the supervisory board and male executive board member who stayed on – identified with and supported the goal of appointing a woman and that they joined forces with the leading change agents at several crucial decision points during the recruitment and selection procedure. As such, these actors acted as change agents too, although they did not initiate or lead the change process; their role was more supportive and cooperative.

The fact that the men on the company's boards did not act as frontrunners in the change process in the same way the woman on these boards did is one way in which the former differ from the latter. A second crucial way in which the men on these boards are different from the frontrunners concerns these actors' motivations. We saw that the frontrunners were committed to the issue of WoB, spoke of gender practices they had witnessed during their career and saw as unjust, and were motivated to expose and eradicate such injustices in their organization. By contrast, the male change agents' preference for a woman candidate seemed to be linked more to this appointment in particular – to this company, at this point in time – and was motivated by the essentialist idea that women are less prone to risky or macho behaviour. They linked gender diversity to the performance of the board and the company, arguing that it is beneficial for maintaining a healthy organizational culture, especially when ethical conduct is significant for performance. They legitimized the need for WoB by referring to popular discourses of the business case used in (business) media that 'celebrate differences' (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) by arguing that women make better leaders. The quote below shows that the chair of the supervisory board referred to this when he explained why he wanted to appoint a woman:

We have experienced an enormous macho culture over the past twenty years. And we've really tried to combat it. Less macho element and more 'boss element'; we want to give this a lot more attention. It's not simply the case that women by definition are better at this than men, but you're more likely to achieve change if you put capable women in this kind of organization. (Robert)

This quote reflects that women were portrayed as more suitable candidates when 'transformational leadership' was required. It also exemplifies that, while the frontrunners recognized and rejected essentialist gender differences, the men change agents' drive to appoint a woman was partly motivated by essentialist beliefs on gender differences (see also Humbert *et al.* 2018). Given that the men on the company's boards did act as change agents in this case – playing a vital role in a woman being appointed – but that their motives and strategies were clearly different from those of the frontrunners in the change process, we call these actors *moderate change agents*.

Notably, nothing indicated that the frontrunners drew attention to or challenged the gender stereotypical notions of the men on the company's boards. Rather, the different change agents seemed to focus on their shared objective of appointing a woman. They worked together, taking steps to towards achieving this goal in several stages of the recruitment and selection process. One of these steps involved drawing up a job profile which stated that: 'If both candidates are equally suitable, the women will be preferred'. Moreover, 'he/she' was used when describing the ideal candidate. This ensured that the pool of suitable candidates explicitly also included women. Furthermore, the emphasis was less on extensive experience in senior positions – which was often prominent in job descriptions in our cases – and more on specific skills and talents, such as the ability to translate company values into workable goals for subordinates. In addition, a conscious decision was made to hire an executive search agency with the reputation of having a broader network of women and different strategies for identifying and recruiting such candidates.

Contrary to what one would expect based on this, the headhunter involved in the procedure – Marianne – did not act as a change agent. Although she believed in the necessity of more WoB – 'it's my task to say: listen you are all men here, you can't do this anymore' – and the client had clearly voiced a preference for appointing a woman, the list of candidates she presented to the client mostly included men. She argued that most women she had screened for the position were unsuitable based on 'the soft qualities' – 'too nice, too soft, and too much doubt about their abilities' – even if they did have the

'other qualities' – 'they had the right experience'. Moreover, Marianne saw the men on the list as the top candidates. CEO Helen said:

There was one male candidate, or two. They tell you that he's a great charismatic guy and this and that ... really praising him. They presented him as the best candidate. And then this man came in and I thought: what's going on here? [...] I fed this back to the agency. But they didn't understand it at all. (Helen)

This quote shows a disagreement between Helen and Marianne about the profile of the ideal candidate. Marianne's evaluations and decisions about which candidates should be on the shortlist were driven by implicit gender notions regarding the qualities that board members should have, by the 'male norm in management' (Hearn, 2004; Wahl, 2014), reproducing a traditional understanding of the ideal board member (e.g. Holgersson *et al.*, 2016). She ascribed her male candidate 'star potential' (see also van den Brink *et al.* 2016) and disregarded female candidates, including the female candidate who was appointed later on in the process. When Helen confronted Marianne with her disapproval of the male candidates, Marianne 'didn't understand it at all' (as Helen described). Marianne did not willingly go against her clients' wishes; in her view, she presented the best candidates to her client. Despite the fact that Marianne was aware of her client's preference for appointing a woman and personally convinced about the need for more WoB she unreflexively gave preference to men candidates. This shows how deeply the male norm is ingrained in the ideal image of the board member and underscores that good intentions do not automatically change masculine norms and gendered views on quality. The fact that Marianne is aware of the current discourse on the need for more WoB, does not mean she is changing fossilized gender norms. Because her actions thwarted the efforts of the change agents to find a woman candidate, not by explicitly or directly opposing gender diversity but by adhering to routinized and gendered ways of recruiting and selecting candidates, we can understand this actor as an *implicit resister*. The consensus and cooperation among the internal change agents ensured that a woman was eventually appointed, despite the fact that the headhunter – the one crucial external actor involved – impeded their efforts.

Case 2: financial sector

Case 2 concerns the appointment of a supervisory board member in a company in the financial sector, which employs roughly 400 people. The company has an executive board consisting of three members. An entirely new supervisory board consisting of four members was formed after the organization gained more autonomy from

the parent company and therefore required its first own supervisory board. This appointment concerns one of the two board seats that were filled last; the chair and another member – both men – had already been appointed. The recruitment and selection processes for the two last vacant seats took place simultaneously.

The actors who were most directly involved in this appointment procedure were the chair of the supervisory board, the chair of an important advisory board within the organization and a headhunter. Most interactions during the recruitment and selection process were between these three actors. However, we found that other members of the advisory board also played a decisive – albeit more indirect – role. The executive board and the parent company (a major shareholder) played an important but also more indirect role.

The owner of this company, the shareholder, had appointed two candidates already. But then we [the advisory board] said: we want to have a say in this too. And then we, in deliberation with [the shareholder], agreed that we could nominate two candidates and for one position this was a binding nomination. (Karel)

This quote by the chair of the advisory board, Karel, illustrates how this board's involvement in the appointment of board members was negotiated. When the organization's first own supervisory board was being formed, there was 'room' to negotiate who would 'sit at the table' when board members were recruited and selected. The advisory board then successfully challenged established practices and argued that they should have a say in appointments as well. Subsequent negotiations led to the decision to organize parallel procedures for the two board seats that were still vacant. The chairs of the supervisory board (Herman) and of the advisory board (Karel) led this combined appointment procedure and each of them believed in gender diversity and talked about this fairly extensively. Both of these actors linked board diversity to the performance of the board.

It has also been scientifically proven that if you have a diverse team, it performs better, functions better. So then it's only logical that you aim at diversity in your team. (Karel)

When asked why diversity improves team performance, he said: 'Because women act differently than men. Women are more contemplative, less bothered by their ego, look at the common interest more'. Herman's view on diversity was similar, as the following remark illustrates:

I really believe in diversity in a board like a supervisory board. The female factor in a team definitely helps. What is the female factor? Men – and then I'm making

a broad generalization – tend to think something is roughly good enough, and women generally don't like it if something is roughly good enough. (Herman)

Hence, both actors related more gender diversity to better team performance, arguing that it improves decision making by introducing a different – female – perspective that they assumed to be more reflective and critical. In other words, these actors' motivation to increase board gender diversity relies partly on the rhetoric of the business case and their – stereotypical – beliefs in gender differences.

While the supervisory board chair and advisory board chair were evidently proponents of board diversity, we observed that other actors had initiated the conversation about striving to appoint a woman in an earlier stage, as the next remark by Karel illuminates:

So we said this fairly early on in the advisory board: we want a woman in this position. There were a few people on the advisory board who really wanted this and pushed hard for it. And a few who wanted it less. But ultimately there was broad consensus on this. (Karel)

This quote illustrates that certain advisory board members put the topic on the agenda. Other members were initially less convinced and outspoken regarding this matter. The quote suggests that the chair was one of the latter. It also shows that the actors who raised the issue managed to convince their colleagues on this board. Something similar occurred later on in the process, when the longlist was compiled, as the following remark illustrates:

There was one woman on the [advisory board] who was very explicit about: this woman has to go on the longlist. [...] And I knew this woman as well. I said: well, I agree, because I know her too. (Karel)

Again, a member of the advisory board, a woman, took the initiative by suggesting that a specific female candidate should be put on the longlist. Karel concurred and made sure that this candidate, who would later be appointed, was indeed placed on the longlist. Hence, while he interacted with the other actors who were directly involved in this procedure, other advisory board members seem to have acted as frontrunners in the change process, starting the discussion about striving to appoint a woman and intervening later on during the process. Given that these frontrunners were evidently highly motivated to appoint a woman, but were not in a position to single-handedly affect change and chose their strategies accordingly, we may understand these actors as *tempered radicals*.

We also observed that the advisory board chair and the supervisory board chair could easily be convinced by the

members of the advisory board who acted as frontrunners in this case:

So we quickly agreed with the [advisory board] about these concerns [trying to increase board gender diversity]. And also with the headhunter. (Herman)

Once the frontrunners on the advisory board got the advisory board chair (Karel) to embrace the aim of appointing a woman, he actively advocated this idea towards the supervisory board chair and the headhunter. The quote also introduces a third actor – the headhunter (Ted) – and illustrates that Herman and Karel identified this external actor as like-minded. We observed that these three actors became co-owners of the goal of appointing a woman and acted as change agents. One illustration of this is the following account of the instructions that were given to the headhunter.

We have a strong preference that one of the two candidates, at least one of the two candidates, is a woman. We also explain why we consider this to be important and then yes, for the longlist too, we want several women on the longlist so we can weigh them up against one another and make a selection. (Herman)

Importantly, the headhunter in this case did not merely follow other actors' instructions, but truly worked together with the internal change agents and contributed actively to the change process:

So the point of departure was that a board of four people had to be formed. And when I was approached, the board had already been partly assembled, more or less from the inside, resulting in two men: a male chair and another man. I suggested then that, as far as I was concerned, the outcome of the process should be the appointment of at least one woman. (Ted)

Ted recounts how he suggested to the other actors that one of the two positions that had to be filled should go to a woman. His phrasing bears close resemblance to the prior remark by Herman. Regardless of who did in fact take the initiative here, these quotes indicate that the two internal and one external actor who were most directly involved in this procedure agreed with each other. So, in the selection stage, all three change agents paid attention to maintaining sufficient numbers of women on the medium and shortlist. The wording here suggests that this was a joint effort; Ted makes no distinction between himself and the other actors. Yet, we found that he did sometimes take the initiative, for example by suggesting that interviews should first and foremost be held with the women on the shortlist, as the following quote indicates.

So we then had five women and three men on this medium list. [...] And then I deliberately proposed that

in the first instance, as these two women were extremely suitable, that these two women should be interviewed by the selection committee. (Ted)

The role of the headhunter in this change process thus seems to have been more active than in the first case and when compared with the change agency of most headhunters described by Doldor *et al. et al.* (2016). In contrast to their findings, Ted actively suggested unorthodox approaches to his client to work toward appointing a woman. Moreover, he talked in detail about why he found board gender diversity important.

I think that women also contribute other aspects to these board meetings. My experience is that when women sit on boards for the first time, if you speak to the men on these boards six months later, nine out of ten times they will say that the discussion has really changed. (Ted)

This quote shows that Ted's motives were similar to those of Herman and Karel; he related gender diversity to team performance. Given these actors' crucial role in the appointment of a woman and taking into account their motives, we describe these actors as *moderate change agents*.

We found that this alliance between the advisory board chair, the supervisory board chair, and the headhunter – as well as the frontrunner role of certain advisory board members – were crucially important to counter the executive board and the shareholder. We observed that the latter two were the key actors in this case who resisted change. The following remark is illustrative of what this resistance entailed:

Initially the board wanted to put two people there themselves, two of their own puppets, who would supervise. (Karel)

Chair of the advisory board – Karel – echoes the earlier remark by Ted that the first two board members had been appointed 'from the inside' and suggests that the executive board preferred to appoint board members that were 'known' to them and who they trusted would not challenge them. This shows that the members of the executive board originally planned to arrange the appointment of two new board members informally, involving only a small number of actors in the decision-making process. Apparently, they did not reflect on this exclusionary homosocial practice. Adhering to this way of doing things would most likely have resulted in less emphasis on gender diversity throughout the entire procedure. This illustrates that these actors' resistance to change was not explicit in nature. Rather than disagreeing with the objective of appointing a woman in principle, these resisters were unwilling or unable to adopt a new approach or perspective; they adhered to routine gender

practices in recruitment and selection processes. We can therefore understand these actors as *implicit resisters*.

During the recruitment and selection process, the resistance of the executive board was a concern to the change agents, as the following quote illustrates:

That was the thing, here and there, because Herman had to ensure coverage by the executive board here. But in the end it went well. (Karel)

This remark suggests that the role of the actor closest to the executive board, Herman, in bridging the differences between the resisters and the change agents was vital. Herman himself also stressed the importance of the clear and unanimous support for the aim of appointing a woman in overcoming resistance:

In the first instance Karel and I agreed really quickly about who our preferred candidate was. Then we talked to the advisory board, together with Ted. And they understood our arguments and considerations and also agreed with us quickly. And that was it for us. Be it that the shareholder had to see it that way too. But we were pretty solid in ... Then a lot of arguments have to come from somewhere, if it isn't going to be this. (Herman).

Actors, motivations and strategies

We distinguish several types of actors, their motivations and their collective strategies: champions, tempered radicals, moderates and implicit resisters. Although most type of actors have been previously identified in the literature, we observed the crucial role of a new type of actor: moderate change agents.

The first type of actors emerging from our data were the *gender equality champions*, who are the most active and outspoken proponents of change; they initiate the change process and use the most radical strategies. These actors – mostly women – are predominantly driven by their concern with the issue of WoB in general, personal experiences and frustration with gender inequality, and their motivation to avoid such inequalities in their own organizations. Their strategies include putting the goal to appoint a woman on the table, pointing others to former agreements, drawing attention to gender practices, opting for unorthodox approaches, or demanding to change headhunters when the latter are not committed to search for women candidates. Such champions, especially if they hold senior management positions, are often portrayed as macro change agents, institutional entrepreneurs or heroic leaders willing to explicitly endorse and promote gender equality (Wahl, 2014; Kelan and Wratil, 2018). Because they mostly hold positional power, they are less afraid to confront others with their change agenda and to create conflict when necessary. Prior research often emphasized how powerful men can be agents of change (Kelan,

2018; de Vries, 2015; Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009). Some studies have even questioned the ability of women gaining access to power positions to ‘rock the boat’ and disrupt the gender order (Martin, 2004; Cohen and Huffman, 2007). Our study shows that senior women are not always ‘cogs in the machine’ (Stainback *et al.*, 2016; van Hek and van der Lippe, 2019), but can be crucial drivers for change. Without their commitment, change towards more gender equality will become an even harder and long-term process.

The second type of actors emerging from our data were the *tempered radicals*. Their motivation arose from social justice and fairness considerations, their ‘personal identity and beliefs’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995, p. 586) and experience and frustration with gender inequality in recruitment and selection. Most of the tempered radicals were women who recounted situations in which they had observed gender practices and wanted to change this. Because they were often not in the position to single-handedly affect change or command others to make change happen, their strategies were less radical than those of the champions; they tended to avoid direct confrontations with other actors. Rather, tempered radicals focused on formal and informal negotiations and small wins such as putting in good words for women candidates.

A third group of crucial actors we identified has not been identified in previous research. This group – mostly men – played a critical role in changing recruitment and selection of board members. At first sight, their stance towards the issue of gender equality in their boards or organizations is quite ‘neutral’; they do not see it as an imperative issue in the functioning of the board, but are also not strong resisters. As their own interests are not so much at stake, they are open for arguments and may change their position due to group dynamics. In the case of strong frontrunners, they might be convinced to join the change agenda. These *moderate change agents* are primarily persuaded by the belief that diversity is beneficial for the performance of a board – leading, for example, to more critical and therefore fruitful discussions. They are mainly receptive to popular discourses regarding the ‘business case’ for gender equality, which are partly based on essentialist ideas about characteristics of women and men. This clearly sets them apart from the frontrunners, who strongly rejected and opposed gender stereotypes. Strategies used by moderate change agents were also different from those of champions and tempered radicals; these actors were less outspoken and less likely to initiate change. Yet, their affinity with diversity meant that they were receptive when frontrunners raised the issue of aiming to appoint a woman. However, without gender equality champions or tempered radicals, moderates may become indifferent or passive actors, or even implicit resisters.

The last group of actors identified in our data were the *implicit resisters*. We call them resisters because they preferred adhering to routine and, importantly, gendered ways of recruiting and selecting. They are not outspoken opponents of gender diversity on boards; this might be related to the popular discourse around beneficial effects of board diversity – reflected also in the general agreement to gender quotas in the Dutch Corporate Governance Code – that may prevent actors from explicitly speaking out against gender diversity. However, resistance towards gender equality is not always explicit, but can be implicit (Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013), such as paying lip service to gender policies but failing to act (Hoque and Noon, 2004). As gender practices are often deeply ingrained in the organizations' routine ways of doing things (Acker, 2006; Wahl, 2014), the implicit resisters impeded opportunities for change by holding on to these gender routines. One way in which this worked was by using masculine models, stereotypes, and symbols when defining the ideal candidate.

Dynamics between different actors

Our findings also provide insights in the dynamics between the different actors in the decision-making process. Analyzing the interactions between different actors is essential if we want to better understand how various types of actors play a role in realizing or hampering change in recruitment and selection. First, we observe that the formation of coalitions between different types of change agents was of crucial importance for the outcomes of appointment procedures. Second, we identify three collective practices that impact the change agenda: seeking support, mobilizing others and counterbalancing routines.

Formation of coalitions. The formation of *coalitions between and among champions and tempered radicals* led to recognition of values and beliefs that they shared, which seemed to reinforce the aspirations of these actors. It made them more assertive and resolute in their actions. For example, in case 1, discussions between members of the supervisory board and the CEO made clear that they shared a strong preference to appoint a woman and that they would support each other's initiatives, which seems to have contributed to the formulation of a particularly clear-cut aim. Such clear goals appear to be the key to success, because they steer the subsequent steps in the recruitment and selection process. In situations with gender equality champions present, we observed that tempered radicals could make use of discourses of champions to build their case. The coalitions with champions created a psychological safe space where tempered radicals felt free to express their views on gender

equality without worrying about self-preservation or protection (see also Roloff and Edmondson, 2008).

Champions and tempered radicals also formed *coalitions with moderate change agents*. The frontrunners (champions and tempered radicals) negotiated with these moderate actors to convince them, gain their support, and spur them into action. In doing so, the frontrunners engaged the more moderate actors and created 'organizational voice' (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). For example, in case 2, certain members of the advisory board convinced the chair (and other members) of this board who was initially less outspoken about wanting to appoint a woman, but who eventually committed fully to this aim and propagated it even in settings where the frontrunners of change could not sit at the table. This means that the champions and tempered radicals have the potential to engage moderate change agents in coalitions for gender diversity even when some moderates are initially 'bystanders'. Once mobilized, moderate change agents can act as co-owners of this issue, making no distinction between the frontrunners and themselves, using the word 'we' to refer to coalitions with champions and tempered radicals and shared aims and actions. They supported initiatives of frontrunners, worked together with them and actively advocated the ideas of these frontrunners when interacting with other actors. Thus, moderates who are ambivalent to gender equality in organizations may view gender equality change as a worthy pursuit particularly if encouraged by a group of peers.

Collective practices for equality agenda. From our data, we distill three collective practices of coalition partners which were crucial in advancing the gender change agenda in recruitment and selection.

Seeking support formed a crucial step in which frontrunners expressed the preference to appoint a woman, and sought to convince others and to gain their explicit support and endorsement. Champions sought support from tempered radicals, and both champions and tempered radicals sought support from moderate change agents. Though the moderate change agents in these cases would mostly not have taken the lead themselves, had the frontrunners not done so, they could be convinced to support the aim of appointing a woman relatively easily because of their affinity with the issue of board diversity based on popular 'business case' arguments. To convince and gain the backing of moderate change agents, champions and tempered radicals often opted to appeal to – rather than to counter – the sometimes essentialist gender notions underlying business case logics, even though they themselves mostly strongly rejected such notions. Once 'on board', the moderate change agents became key proponents of change. For instance, in case 1, the board members with the most outspoken views on WoB – the frontrunners – convinced the other board

members, who held favorable attitudes towards diversity, to back-up the clearly phrased aim to appoint a woman and to endorse a progressive approach to achieve this aim. In case 2, the most outspoken actors – specific members of the advisory board – started a discussion about aiming to appoint a woman during more informal discussions and managed to convince and gain the support of the other members of that board and subsequently of the members of the supervisory board. In both cases, then, convincing and gaining the support and endorsement of moderate change agents made these actors who were initially less outspoken and active – and who may have remained so had it not been for the frontrunners – complicit to the change process. This formed a precondition for the subsequent steps necessary to accomplishing change.

While the backing of other actors involved formed a precondition, another crucial step was the *mobilization of moderate actors* towards change. Moving beyond merely gaining their support – in a more passive sense – the champions and tempered radicals in these cases managed to activate and mobilize the moderate change agents involved. Once mobilized, these initially more moderate and passive actors became key advocates for change, who actively cooperated in or even proposed initiatives to affect change. Sometimes the moderate change agents carried through the change agenda even when the frontrunners were not present ‘at the table’ and they were the (only) actors to engage directly with actors who resisted change. For example, in case 1, the moderate change agents worked together with the frontrunners not only in drawing up a job profile that captured the aim to appoint a woman and selecting a different type of headhunter, but also in countering this headhunter who implicitly resisted change by proposing candidates who fit a stereotypical image of the ideal board member instead of the more inclusive job profile. In case 2, the moderate change agents, unlike the frontrunners who were only more indirectly involved, were directly involved in the decision-making process and were the ones who interacted directly with the actors who resisted change. The moderate change agents thus became the key advocates for change and the ones to see through the change process which had been instigated by the frontrunners on the advisory board. They suggested changes to the traditional job profile proposed by the executive board who implicitly resisted change, opted for a different type of executive search agency, conveyed the wish to appoint a woman to one of two vacant board seats to the headhunter and demanded that there be a sufficient number of women on the longlist.

The third collective practice involved *counterbalancing routines*. Even in these cases where a woman was appointed – the change agents faced resistance from other actors. The implicit resisters did not overtly object to the

appointment of women; their resistance was indirect and took the form of adhering to routinized gender practices that reproduced the status quo. In case 1, the headhunter’s evaluations and decisions about which candidates should be on the list were driven by stereotypical images of the qualities that board members should have. However, the coalition of change agents countered this resistance and expressed their discontent about the candidates on the list to the headhunter. The consensus and cooperation among different types of change agents thus ensured that a woman was appointed despite the fact that the headhunter – unintentionally – impeded their efforts. In case 2, the executive board members initially set out to appoint two new board members with little interference from other actors, which would have resulted in much less attention for diversity throughout the recruitment and selection process and in all likelihood in homosocial reproduction. In addition, the executive board took the lead in drafting a job profile in which they largely reproduced traditional, gender stereotypical notions about the ideal board member. However, the change agents challenged the planned procedure, gaining access to the decision-making process, and made several suggestions to adapt the search profile. With a majority of implicit resisters, gender practices will continue to take place in recruitment and selection, even when there is an official gender equality program. Only the constant attention to gendered ways of recruiting can counteract the unreflexive way of practicing gender (Martin, 2004).

Conclusion

Our research adds to the existing literature on gender practices in recruitment and selection by showing how different internal and external actors contribute to gender equality in recruitment and selection practices. The majority of this literature focuses on the reproduction of inequalities (Holgerson 2013; Tienari *et al.*, 2013; Heilman *et al.*, 2015). This knowledge helps us understand the persistence of gender inequality, but does not clarify how we can structurally change gender inequality in recruitment and selection. Therefore, this study provides more insight in the possibilities and actions of individual actors and their collective practices to change gender inequalities. Focusing on recent appointments of members of executive or supervisory boards in the Netherlands, we provide a detailed, in-depth reconstruction of two cases in which women were appointed to boards. Our study allows us to make the following contributions to the literature.

Our *first contribution* is that we provided insight in how *different types of actors* reproduce or counter gender inequality practices in recruitment and selection. Recently, several scholars have pointed out the need

for a closer examination of the role of multiple actors in driving changes in the share of women in senior positions (Doldor *et al.*, 2016; Kelan and Wratil, 2018; Seierstad *et al.*, 2017). Our study goes beyond the role of single actors, and shows the potential change agency of a *variety* of actors. By doing so, we shift attention away from dramatic actions of macro change agents (Battilana *et al.*, 2009; Kelan and Wratil, 2018) to the practices of less outspoken actors. Our study contributes to the literature by introducing a crucial type of change agent whose role in changing gender practices has thus far been overlooked: the *moderate change agent*. This type of change agent does not initiate change processes, but can be engaged and mobilized by frontrunners (champions, tempered radicals). Once they are on board, moderate change agents can become co-owners of and advocates for the issue of achieving more WoB. Hence, like Dolder *et al.* (2016), our research shows that change agents need not always be reformers with a mission, but that change can also come from less outspoken or more marginal actors. Although Humbert and colleagues (2018) argue that (male) leaders becoming change agents for gender equality is not an effective strategy when underlying gender stereotypes are left unchallenged, we argue that their involvement in the change process also offers opportunities. The more intermediate position of moderate change agents means that they are able to give legitimacy to more radical actors pushing for change. As their actions can be perceived as more acceptable by implicit resisters, these moderates may bridge the gap between frontrunners and resisters. As such, moderates in powerful positions can ‘tip the balance’ in the gender change agenda.

Our second contribution is that we shed light on how the collaborations between different kinds of actors can affect whether gender inequality practices in the recruitment and selection are reproduced or countered. Previous studies pointed to the need for building coalitions between change agents (Kolb & Merrill-Sands 1999), but the question *how* these coalitions challenge gender practices is less explored. Our study identifies collective practices of internal and external actors – seeking support, mobilization of moderate actors and counterbalancing routines – that capture the complexity of the gender change process with layers of negotiated and politicized forms of access to resources (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009). By seeking the support of other outspoken actors and of crucial moderate change agents who are initially less outspoken and active, frontrunners can engage additional actors who are receptive to arguments about gender diversity in the change process to ensure that the change agenda gains traction. When frontrunners manage to activate moderate change agents and spur them into action, moderates can be active proponents of change who propose new and innovative ways to work towards change and carry through the

change agenda when frontrunners are not able to single-handedly affect change or directly engage with actors who resist. Hence, when moderate change agents are mobilized, coalitions can be effective in challenging actors who implicitly resist change by adhering to traditional norms and practices. With these insights in the collective practices, we contribute to the literature on resistance in gender equality by showing how resistance may be overcome through the involvement of moderate change agents in the change process.

Naturally, this research is not without limitations. One point of attention is the scope of our study and its setting. To be able to provide an in-depth account of the role of and dynamics between different actors involved in appointments of board members, we used a case study approach to reconstruct 12 recent appointments of board members in the Netherlands. We discussed two of these cases in detail to illustrate our arguments, although these arguments are also informed by the other 10 cases. Hence, our conclusions are based on these cases and this setting. Further research may explore whether similar processes can be observed elsewhere. Furthermore, future studies could further examine ‘the gender distribution’ among the different types of actors. Our research provided some first clues in this regard, indicating that tempered radicals were more likely to be women, and moderate change agents and implicit resisters were more likely to be men. Second, it would be interesting to better capture the dynamics between board members by making use of observational methods. Hitherto, few studies on gender in recruitment and selection have captured the dynamics of practicing gender in actual evaluations. Attention to practicing gender will make it possible to capture the way inequalities are created in the workplace (Martin, 2006) and the dynamics of gender and gendering (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2016; Herschberg *et al.*, 2018).

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