"It is competence first": executives navigating gender equality targets and meritocracy in technology companies

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to understand how executives in technology companies relate to targets for gender equality, especially pertaining to top management.

Design/methodology/approach – The study draws on 19 interviews of CEOs, senior line managers and HR directors in ten technology companies operating in Finland. The method is (reflexive) thematic analysis.

Findings – Previous studies on the role of executives in promoting gender equality provide somewhat mixed results: while their role is vital, senior leaders may not be inclined to support gender equality targets and measures. Drawing on critical feminist theorizing, this study identifies three ways in which the executives in technology companies related to gender equality targets: endorsing, negotiating and resisting. However, all these responses were constrained by the executives' assumption that their companies are meritocratic. The study illustrates how executives' narrow understanding of gender equality and reliance on the presumably well-working systems, combined with underlying doubts about the competence of women, hinder the advancement of women to top management.

Originality/value – While previous studies have evaluated targets to increase the number/percentage of women, both in certain "ideal case" companies and in terms of their effectiveness more broadly, this study discusses how technology company executives navigate these targets in relation to women's assumed "competence".

Keywords Gender, Equality, Technology companies, STEM, Executives, Top management, Finland

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Although more women have joined the ranks of managers in recent decades, women still face difficulties in advancing their careers and their proportion at top management level remains small (e.g. Glosenberg *et al.*, 2022; Kossek *et al.*, 2017; Schäpers *et al.*, 2022). The dearth of women in top positions of technology companies is particularly striking, despite decades of research and intervention efforts. Hence, Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) fields provide a fruitful setting to study the challenges of women's (lack of) progress to top management.

To attract more diverse workforce, many technology companies have set targets to increase the percentage share of women and/or women executives among their ranks. However, we only have limited knowledge of how these targets are perceived and whether they work in increasing gender equality. Research drawing on critical feminist perspectives has established that masculine culture(s), stereotypes, prevalent gender(ed) structures and the intertwining of technology and masculinity hinder women's advancement in technology companies (e.g. Faulkner, 2014; Galea *et al.*, 2020; Jansson and Sand, 2021). Nonetheless, the importance of these factors is usually downplayed, and many executives continue to explain the low percentage by the lack of competent women or their unwillingness to pursue top jobs (e.g. Galea and Chappell, 2021).

Prior studies provide somewhat mixed results on the role of executives and senior leaders in advancing gender equality. Some studies emphasize executives' positive impact in challenging prevailing masculine norms (e.g. Holgersson and Romani, 2020; O'Brien *et al.*, 2023; Wahl, 2014), whereas others find that male leaders show most propensity to defend the status quo (Cortis, Foley and Williamson, 2022; Humbert *et al.*, 2018; Wynn, 2020). This may be linked to how high-level executives understand gender (in)equality, impacting their willingness to engage in change efforts (Wynn, 2020; Humbert *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, to improve gender equality in technology companies, we need to better understand how executives perceive and act upon gender equality targets in different settings.

This study aims to understand how executives in technology companies relate to targets for gender equality, contributing to recent literature on the role of senior leaders (e.g. Cortis *et al.*, 2022; Holgersson and Romani, 2020; Wynn, 2020). The study draws from nineteen interviews of CEOs, senior line managers and HR directors in ten technology companies operating in Finland. The study shows how executives in technology companies navigate between promoting gender equality, which they understand as increasing the number/percentage of women, and adhering to what they consider a well-functioning merit-based system of recruitment and career advancement. While the study identifies three ways in which the executives relate to gender equality targets (endorsing, negotiating and resisting), all these responses are constrained by the executives' belief that their companies are functioning meritocracies.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The next section introduces literature related to male privilege and career paths for women in STEM, and executives' role in advocating gender equality. The following section describes the data and methods used in the study, followed by the findings. These are followed by discussion and lastly by conclusions and implications for managers.

Theoretical background
Male privilege and career paths for women in STEM
Recent studies drawing on critical feminist approaches highlight the mechanisms of masculine privilege that hinder women's progress in male-dominated STEM organizations (Beddoes, 2021; Blair-Loy and Cech, 2022; Galea and Chappell, 2021; O'Connor, 2020). Women often struggle to establish their credibility and competence as technology professionals whereas men are considered to "naturally" possess technical talent (e.g. Alegria, 2019; Faulkner, 2014; Tassabehji *et al.*, 2021). Women's technical competence appears questionable as the technical/social dualism identified by Faulkner (2000) still assigns men as technical and women as social (Alegria, 2019; Tassabehji *et al.*, 2021).

Galea and Chappell (2021) find that masculine privilege is sustained via three mechanisms: a culture of denial (i.e. denying that privilege systems exist); perceptions that rules are neutral, legitimate and applied objectively; and through backlash and resistance to

keep the gender status quo in place. O'Connor (2020) illustrates how gender inequality in male-dominated higher education institutions is reflected at a structural level in the underrepresentation of women in senior positions and at a cultural level in the legitimacy of a wide range of (informal) practices that value men and facilitate their access to such positions. At the same time, these cultural practices – legitimated by gender stereotypes – undervalue women and inhibit their access (O'Connor, 2020). Blair-Loy and Cech (2022, p. 31) argue that the problem of inequality in (academic) STEM is embedded in the cultural definition of merit itself: "the definitions of merit reproduce inequality because they infuse gender, racial/ethnic, and LGBTQ biases into the yardsticks along which professional competence and worthiness are measured".

Women's technical competence can thus appear fragile while their social competence is reinforced by supervisors and colleagues (e.g. Alegria, 2019; Tassabehji et al., 2021). According to Cardador (2017), management roles in engineering firms are perceived – by both men and women – as more stereotypically feminine and thus more suitable to women. Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, women's stereotypical strengths deem them a better fit for managerial than technical roles (Alegria, 2019; Cardador, 2017). However, management roles come with significant trade-offs for women (Cardador, 2017; Holth et al., 2017). While project/team leaders and managers are formally higher positions, technological careers are usually more valued within technology organizations and moving into management means loss of technical competence for women (Alegria, 2019; Cardador, 2017; Holth et al., 2017). Cardador (2017, p. 612) concludes that moving women into managerial roles fosters both their inclusion (through enhanced access to leadership roles and perceptions of role fit) and their exclusion (through lower identification with engineering and validation of persistent gender stereotypes).

Managers as change agents for gender equality

Gender equality initiatives mostly rely on the assumption that (predominantly male) senior leaders will see and accept that gendered inequalities exist within their organizations, and are willing to promote policies that may, in fact, undermine their own privilege and standing (Cortis et al., 2022; Humbert et al., 2018). Certain studies question this optimism. Cortis et al. (2022) find that in the Australian public sector, senior leaders – both male and female – were more likely than lower-ranked employees to defend the status quo and male leaders expressed most support for the existing arrangements. Moreover, an EU-wide study (Humbert et al., 2018) finds that gender essentialist beliefs, indicating that traits and/or preferences can be attributed to one's gender, are more prevalent among male leaders. Consequently, male leaders were less likely to support equality interventions such as quotas or targets.

Some studies show that top executives in technology companies can challenge the prevailing gender order and act as change agents promoting gender equality (Holgersson and Romani, 2020; Wahl, 2014). As Wahl (2014) explains, even men who represent hegemonic masculinities can challenge the norm when questioning the ideology that justifies men's domination in management. Gender awareness opens space for reflections on the structural advantages that male managers experience as men (Wahl, 2014). Holgersson and Romani (2020) show how the purposeful management of organizational culture, drawing on gender egalitarian ideology, can expose and challenge the masculine norm within (IT) industry and society and provide a more gender equal norm for the organization. In the Swedish case company, normative control promoting gender equality is put into practice through multiple organizational practices, such as empowering management style and extra efforts to recruit women.

The findings of Holgersson and Romani (2020) and Wahl (2014), while hopeful, raise the question of how important the broader societal context for executives' engagement in structural changes is – gender equality is strongly on the management agenda in Sweden, as the authors also acknowledge. The attitudes and beliefs of the executives also have strong impact. Based on an extensive case study in a Silicon Valley technology company, Wynn (2020) finds that top executives tend to limit their efforts to individualistic and/or societal types of change, such as unconscious bias trainings and mentorship programs, rather than organizational, structural changes. Although the company is described by Wynn (2020, p. 111) as an "ideal context" due to its comparatively inclusive culture, initiatives designed to achieve equality in the organization are limited in their reach and effectiveness because they remain anchored to individualistic gender ideologies and hence rather reinforce the status quo than challenge it.

As the above results indicate, executives' willingness to engage in gender equality initiatives and advocate for change may depend partly on the country context but there is likely variation between companies as well. Therefore, we need to understand more about how managers and other executives relate to potential targets in various settings. This study focusses on Finland, a country that is in many aspects among the leaders in gender equality (like Sweden), but wherein top management positions in the private sector are still overwhelmingly dominated by men.

Data and methods

The aim of this study is to understand how executives in technology companies relate to targets for gender equality, particularly pertaining to top management. The data for the study is based on nineteen semi-structured interviews of executives in ten technology companies [1] operating in Finland, with the number of interviewees per company ranging from one to four. Interviews were selected as the research method as the purpose was to gain understanding of how executives understand and reflect upon (increasing) gender equality in their companies. The research setting allows for comparison of executives' responses in companies with and without gender equality targets (four and six companies, respectively).

In the sample, six interviewees were CEOs (CEO), nine were HR managers/directors (HR) and four were senior managers (Manager). Representatives of HR were interviewed in all but one company whereas CEOs were interviewed in six companies and Managers in one company. Ten interviewees were men and nine were women; of the CEOs, five were male and one was female whereas of the HR managers/directors, six were female and three were male. The four managers were evenly men and women (two and two). The age of the interviewees ranged from 32 to 60 years, with most interviewees in their 40s and 50s. The nationality of the interviewees was not asked, but 18 interviewees were supposedly Finnish, and one was Western European. All interviewees were "white", which is still typical in Finnish companies.

The first round of interviews was conducted in March–May 2019 (nine companies, 15 interviewees) and second round in May 2021 (one company, four interviewees) as part of larger research projects that also involved a survey and statistical analysis of survey data. In spring 2019, 14 interviews were conducted face-to-face at the premises of the case companies and one by Skype. In 2021, all four interviews were conducted by Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews lasted from 26–61 min. with an average of 47 min. Interview consent forms were signed according to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. The author conducted twelve of the interviews and observed three, whereas four interviews were conducted without the author present. All interviews were audio-recorded and most (13) interviews were transcribed verbatim (by a company with a confidentiality

agreement). For six interviews conducted by the author, the original interview notes based on the recordings were used instead, and this is indicated in the quotes. Eighteen interviews were conducted in Finnish and one in English. The quotes used in this paper were translated from Finnish by the author (being mindful of the cross-language issues mentioned for example by Marschan-Piekkari and Reis, 2004) [2], and they have been anonymized to protect the interviewees. Pseudonyms were added by the author (all pseudonyms are Finnish names for purposes of anonymity).

The analysis method is (reflexive) thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The analysis process started with the author submitting the transcripts (or interview notes for six interviews) into Atlas.ti 9 software. As the interviews were part of two different research projects and covered various topics, the first step was to identify relevant content among the interview data. For this study, these were comments related to top management, their recruitment, and gender equality. The initial coding stage produced over 50 codes or categories related to these topics, such as "top management", "importance of gender equality", "discrimination of men" and "challenges in recruitment". Coded comments were then reread several times, checked and merged into the eight main categories listed in Table 1. Please note that the categories are not mutually exclusive (i.e. one mention can belong to more than one category).

In this paper, the focus is on the categories "Gender diversity of top management" and "Gender vs. competence (of top management)" although these overlap with other categories as well. In analysing the comments, the purpose was to identify the ways in which the executives relate to gender equality targets and measures. Drawing on the literature discussed in the previous section, it was expected that executives express support as well as resistance towards the targets. Thus, the responses were first categorized as "endorsing" or "resisting". Nonetheless, it became apparent that a third category, reflecting the ambiguity expressed by several interviewees, was also required. This category was named "negotiating". The findings are described and analysed in the next section.

Findings

The study identifies three ways in which the executives in technology companies responded to gender equality targets: endorsing, negotiating and resisting. Drawing on Galea and Chappell (2021), the comments in the last response group are further classified into three groups: no need for any targets, the competence-first approach and backlash. However, all these are strongly intertwined. Examples of the comments categorized in each response group are presented in Table 2.

Categories	No. of mentions
Gender diversity of top management	29
Competence/skills of top management	35
Gender vs competence (of top management)	58
(Gender) diversity in the company	41
Goals, processes and follow-up of gender equality in company	106
Careers, career progression and recruitment processes in the company	114
Gender not important/no gender bias	38
Promoting company and/or technology field (to increase the number of women)	26
Source: Author's own creation	

Table 1.
Main categories and number of mentions

Responses to gender equality targets	Endorsing	Negotiating	Resisting
Companies WITH gender equality targets	*Some departments have never hired women, they have clearly done something wrong*	*Does it mean that we hire only women then going forward? Of course, it does not mean that*	No need: *Are we now seven then? Two are women. [–] In my view both capabilities and these personality profiles, personal chemistry, so pretty well, rather well balanced*
	It would increase equality, if we got women to [BUSINESS], has been a very male field	*Let's say the target is 50/50 but it cannot be the target that if I am the recruiting supervisor so every other of my recruits should be a female*	Competence first: *It would be rather difficult for me to recruit the less competent one of two candidates just to fill in a female quota*
		Not so that if there are two equal candidates, a man and a woman, the woman should be selected, because the man may have some other qualities that are better suited for that position	Backlash: *If people can see this person actually isn't on this level but is there just to make up some kind of number then that is visible and people aren't stupid. I think that creates more problems than it's worth*
Companies WITHOUT gender equality targets			No need: *We don't have targets, in my view equity and equality is about looking for a suitable person with suitable skills; I think it would go to the wrong direction if there was [TARGETS FOR WOMEN]*
			Competence first: *Gender or skin colour or anything else has no impact. [–] We look at merits and look at what kind of person it is*
			Backlash: *For example, if there are X percent of females as [FIELD] engineers, and if one would aim for significantly higher percentage than X in one's own activities, then that could be also dangerous*

Source: Author's own creation

Executives endorsing gender equality targets

Four companies out of ten had specified targets to increase the percentage share of women in the company and/or in management, namely, Companies A, B, C and D. Nonetheless, only the executives in Company A and one executive in Company B expressed strong support for the targets.

In Company A, CEO Jari (male) clearly endorses the targets that have been set at the (international) Group level. For example, he comments that "there are some departments that have never hired women, they have clearly done something wrong". Jari seems genuinely satisfied that they are reaching the target for women executives at Business group level. He mentions stereotypes against women and acknowledges hearing some

criticism towards the targets, but points out that it is necessary to have goals that require taking gender equality into account in recruitment and other processes." *[I]f we just say that we will try to fix this or wonder that we would get [MORE WOMEN] then it will not happen"* (Jari, male, CEO, from notes). Jari explains that they demand from headhunting firms that the long list of candidates must also include women. Moreover, he says that in the case of two equal candidates, he would probably select the women because of the target. This view is echoed by Petri (male, HR) who says that there is a policy (in principle) to select the woman if there are two equal candidates.

Company B had recently specified an ambitious target related to increasing the percentage share of women among its ranks. Sanna (female, manager) comments:

> [COMPANY B] has a rather strong message. Nowadays especially that more and more in my view it is emphasized that for example we are aiming at the percentage of women among employees to be at certain level and so on.

Kati, a manager with previous experiences of being the first woman in a top team, explains that increasing the number of women is beneficial for men as well:

> If we get for example in the management group 30, 40 % like women, so then it is liberating not only for those women but also for all the men because then it will be realized that gender has not been the primary thing that impacts that people are different (Kati, female, manager).

Here, Kati reflects on her experiences as a "token" (Kanter, 1977; Lewis and Simpson, 2012), suggesting that a more gender balanced team could shift the focus on other differences than gender.

Kati in Company B is the only interviewee who seems to be willing to take on the role of an advocate, like the executives in Holgersson and Romani's (2020) study. She feels it is her role to remind the rest of the organization as well:

> Now there have been some cases for example just related to merit-based rewards and compensation where I had to remind global HR that hey, let's check before confirming the decisions that let's look at like gender [LAUGHTER] – so it does not seem to be quite standard process at every level yet. (Kati, female, manager).

Negotiating gender equality targets

In companies with gender equality targets, several executives keep negotiating what they mean in practice. Petri (male, HR) in Company A describes an incident where an employee representative asked what the target means:

> One employee representative asked in one meeting as a joke that does it mean that we hire only women then going forward? Of course it does not mean that. It requires that we start from getting more attention from women than the field has traditionally done, and then build these career paths to women once we get them in here. Petri (male, HR, from notes)

It is clear to Petri, and apparently to all meeting participants, that such a question – do we hire only women then? – can only be asked as a joke, and his immediate response is that "of course" the target does not mean that.

In Company B, other managers than Kati seem to distance themselves from the publicly announced target. Jukka (male, manager) in Company B comments that:

> [. . .] let's say the target is 50/50 but it cannot be the target that if I am the recruiting supervisor so every other of my recruits should be a female. Because then we would be very deeply in the swamp.

Jukka further discusses that it is important to have goals but there should be room for maneuver in how to get there. Arto (male, manager) denies even knowing about the target: "I don't know of any specific kind of targets that we should have X number or X percentage of [WOMEN]. I haven't seen those" albeit he later explains his understanding of Company B's policy: "I think [Company B]'s target is [–] to build an organization based on competence [WHILE BEING] respective of those diversity issues".

Company C had previously specified targets for the percentage of women in general and in management but the process of determining the new targets was still underway. Sari (HR) comments that since women in the company's management group currently head support functions, their goal is to recruit women managers to the business functions: "It would increase equality, if we got women to [BUSINESS], has been a very male field." (Sari, female, HR, from notes). While Sari thus expresses support the company's goals, she also mentions that women should not necessarily be favored:

> Not so that if there are two equal candidates, a man and a woman, the woman should be selected, because the man may have some other qualities that are better suited for that position.

Furthermore, CEO Jussi (male, from notes) discusses that it is challenging to get the right kind of candidates and ponders on prioritizing women:

> To prioritize one gender at that point, that would a rather challenging decision to make, not saying that it could not occasionally be done, sometimes in important roles we have got women who are good.

In Company D, there has been a target for the percentage of women at the (international) Group level, and Miia (female, HR) explains that the Group has systematically promoted women to top management and two of the major Business units are headed by women. She mentions of a Group guideline that there should always be two candidates (male and female) at the last stage and if these are equal, the woman should be selected. However, Miia says that the Group target "has not touched us or become part of this company's doings". Likewise, CEO Vesa (male) says that gender equality is talked about in the company and is promoted, albeit he does not see it as an issue. When asked if the Group target is binding, he responds:

> No it is not obligatory. And for me it is very difficult to see that it could be obligatory, because if it was obligatory, then it would be discriminatory. [PAUSE] But of course, when it is there among the targets, it takes care that it will not be forgotten.

Executives resisting gender equality targets
The executives presented numerous comments that can be interpreted as resistance to the gender equality targets of their company, or against setting such targets at all.

No need for gender equality targets
Neither of the two companies with only one woman in the management group have set targets for increasing the number of women in top management, because what counts is "finding the right person for the right post" (Mika, male, HR, Company G). Mika describes their management group as comprising of "nine male engineers and one woman", while in Company E, Teemu (male, HR) comments:

> I am dissatisfied genuinely with the number of women in our management group. I wish there were more women, while on the other hand, it is the challenge in our field. [–] Only one out of nine is currently a woman.

Nonetheless, both Teemu and Mika bring up quotas and resist them because they could indicate selecting women on other basis than merit:

> I am scared of the idea of having quotas. Because we always head for skills, experience, we complement each other, but genuinely, I would like to have more women in our management group (Teemu, male, HR).

In Company D, Vesa (male, CEO) comments:

> Are we now seven then? Two are women. And to me it is quite, and then of course that executive assistant acts as the secretary, so in meetings then we have one more woman. But I can't still really comment otherwise than that in my view both capabilities and these personality profiles, personal chemistry, so pretty well, rather well balanced.

For Vesa, what seems to matter is the number of female bodies (in the meeting room). Although Vesa's view can be considered somewhat extreme, most executives only count the women (cf. Pecis, 2016), and rarely reflect other aspects of equality such as the role of women in the management groups.

Many of the respondents worry about even appearing to recruit women just to increase gender equality or diversity. For example, in Company I, Arja (female, CEO, from notes) explains that their company has no gender equality targets, because these might set the company in the wrong direction:

> We don't have targets, in my view equity and equality is about looking for a suitable person with suitable skills; I think it would go to the wrong direction if there was [TARGETS FOR WOMEN].

Olli (male, CEO, Company F) considers that it would be "dangerous" to aim for too high percentage of women:

> For example, if there are X percent of females as [FIELD] engineers, and if one would aim for significantly higher percentage than X in one's own activities, then that could be also dangerous.

Competence first – but do women have it?
All the interviewed executives agree that recruitment and career progression to top management, as well as in the company overall, is – and should be – based only on merit or competence. As Arto (male, manager) in Company B puts it: "[W]e are recruiting based on competence and not age, sex, nationality or any other kind of. We're looking for competence." In Company D, Vesa (male, CEO) comments that:

> I wonder who it was who recently said that it would be undermining to women that it is necessary to specifically emphasize some female quotas. Now we all move around with our own merits and professional qualities.

Likewise, Olli (male, CEO, Company F) comments that: "[w]hen talking about career advancement or any such thing then it has to be based on meritocracy and nothing else matters."

Similarly, Mika (male, HR, Company G) says that:

> [. . .] gender or skin colour or anything else has no impact. Background, ethnical background of anything else so they should not impact that recruitment in any way. So we look at merits and look at what kind of person it is.

The comment by Mika is rather revealing; apparently "gender or skin colour or anything else" is detached from "what kind of person it is". This is in line with the meritocratic ideal

which assumes that "ability can be quantified, separated from social context and assigned to the individual" (Simpson and Kumra, 2016, p. 568). However, as scholars of gender in organizations have emphasized, evaluation is a subjective process and concepts such as leadership, excellence, competence and quality are social constructions in which gender is embedded (e.g. Van den Brink *et al.*, 2016). Thus, separating "merit" and "person" may not be feasible in practice.

Some respondents, nevertheless, express (at least some) awareness of potential bias that could prevent the career progression for women. For example, Olli (male, CEO, Company F), while explaining that only the best candidates are selected, mentions that he tries to be objective about the criteria for the best to avoid any structural bias. Juha (male, CEO, Company J) ponders that one would assume that headhunters do not have biases but considers that it is possible. Sanna (female, manager, Company B) sees quotas as a potential tool to bring in more women:

> Especially then quotas are a good thing if there is tendency to select, let's say exacerbated a man for a post where a woman would be as competent or more competent of the candidates.

Most strongly the concern for bias towards women is expressed by Miia (female, HR, Company D) who discusses that a woman needs to be "many times more competent" to be selected: "[W]ith traditional thinking, the man is just easier to select, just because it is a man, even if he was, was not that competent or something. I don't know what is this model of thinking, that a woman needs to be many times more competent, but [. . .] it just is so." However, even Miia seems to take "this model of thinking" for granted – "it just is so".

Yet, several executives expressed reservations about the competence of women. Concerning quotas, for example, Vesa (male, CEO, Company D) comments:

> Me, we are guided by competences and capabilities. It would be rather difficult for me to recruit the less competent one of two candidates just to fill in a female quota. To me that would not be fair from any point of view.

Thus, it is self-evident to Vesa that the "less competent" would be the female candidate and that quotas would mean having to hire incompetent women. All interviewees who mention quotas (except Sanna) resist them for similar reasons. Heidi (female, HR, Company H) discusses that hiring to get diversity would be unfair also to the recruited person:

> Well it is competence first, because it would be unfair to [. . .] It would be, I think, in a certain way degrading to the person also, if we were like yes, because you are a woman or of a different cultural background, we are going to recruit you now to get this kind of diversity, although sorry, you don't have the skills that we would need.

Again, the person lacking the required skills is the woman (or of a different cultural background).

Interestingly, the executives were not explicit about what "competence" the women are supposed to lack. However, Miia (female, HR, Company D) discusses that it has been challenging to find women who would be competent enough. She further reflects that what seems to be lacking is certain type of leadership:"[I]n my view many times, when recruiting women, it is that type of clear leadership that is lacking" which when prompted turns out to mean resolve or being assertive. As Cheryan and Markus (2020) highlight, merit in male-dominated fields is often conflated with valuing attributes that are associated with the male gender role, such as taking risks, displaying confidence, promoting oneself and being assertive (also e.g. Blair-Loy and Cech, 2022; Nash and Moore, 2019).

Backlash

Even in companies with gender equality targets, policies that would require deviating from the competence-first principle are considered troublesome. As Arto (male, manager) in Company B points out:

> If people can see this person actually isn't on this level but is there just to make up some kind of number then that is visible and people aren't stupid. I think that creates more problems than it's worth.

Jukka (male, manager) discusses that he shared Company B's target announcement on LinkedIn and then got inquiries about how the target would be reached without discriminating against male employees:

> [W]ell that was an extremely good question [–] and I responded that in my view we need to define, in a certain way, based on skills and abilities and everything beyond those skills is secondary.

Thus, although the company has announced the target that would significantly increase the percentage share of women, Jukka still believes that gender is a "secondary" consideration.

Worrying about the (potential) discrimination of men – in male-dominated technology companies – may be an attempt to legitimize resistance against gender equality targets and initiatives. Male executives in Company A (Jari and Petri) and Company B (Arto and Jukka) bring up the (potential) discrimination of men as a consequence of promoting women and/or gender equality but only Jukka and Arto criticize their company's targets on this basis. Similarly, Bairoh and Putila (2021) find that only (some) men were worried about the discrimination of men in companies with gender equality targets. As Lewis and Simpson (2012) argue, the privileged seek to preserve their advantage through defensive action as well as the mobilization of beliefs regarding who has the right to occupy positions of power.

Discussion

In technology companies, inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) have been found to favor men and gender-fluid women (Alfrey and Twine, 2017). Nonetheless, even when the culture is predominantly masculine, it is possible to initiate changes in the culture and provide alternative conceptions of prevailing gender roles. As Beddoes (2021) points out, technology companies could be working to establish practices, norms, policies, and cultures that do not reinforce dominant group privileges. For example, hostile or chilly climates in technology companies could be mitigated by effective mentors or sponsors in the workplace (Wilson and VanAntwerp, 2021). Especially managers and other executives may, if they are willing, promote such culture change (Cheryan and Markus, 2020; Cortis *et al.*, 2022; O'Brien *et al.*, 2023).

As discussed earlier, previous studies provide mixed results on the role senior leaders and executives play in advancing gender equality in organizations: some emphasize their positive impact (Holgersson and Romani, 2020; O'Brien *et al.*, 2023; Wahl, 2014), whereas others warn of the tendency to defend the status quo (Cortis *et al.*, 2022; Humbert *et al.*, 2018; Wynn, 2020). This study contributes to the discussion by suggesting that executives can relate to gender equality targets in three ways: they can endorse, negotiate, and resist them. Moreover, the study sheds light on the differences between companies with and without defined gender equality targets. While the targets set in four companies gained (some) support from the executives, they seem to be continuously negotiated and even resisted. In companies without targets, on the other hand, none of the executives suggested that they would be necessary.

While only one interviewee used the word "meritocracy" to describe their company, all interviewees subscribe to the meritocratic ideal. The executives agreed that women need to earn recruitment/promotion to top management by being "competent" since in their view, only merit and willingness of the individual (should) count. What they apparently failed to recognize is that "competence", "merit" and similar concepts are subjective and socially constructed notions (Holgersson, 2013; Simpson and Kumra, 2016). The executives clearly considered "merit" an objective, gender-less quality whereas Simpson and Kumra (2016) underline that merit needs to "stick", to be effectively demonstrated through embodied performances that require recognition for it to carry conviction and have value. Furthermore, "white" heterosexual men are most likely to be seen as embodying scientific excellence in STEM (Blair-Loy and Cech, 2022).

Previous studies suggest that the ideal of meritocracy is entrenched in engineering education and in technology companies (Doerr *et al.*, 2021; Nash and Moore, 2019; Seron *et al.*, 2018). This study confirms these findings. In technology companies, setting gender equality targets seems cause a dilemma for the executives: if they promote gender equality, they could be violating the ingrained ideal of meritocracy. The executives believe that increasing gender equality (i.e. the number/percentage of women) would require a wider applicant pool, both internally and externally, so that more women could be selected based on their merits. However, they did not seem to consider how their understanding of "merit" and "competence" impact who is seen to "fit" in the pool. Moreover, while several respondents expressed doubts about the competence of women, it is not clear in what way the women are "less competent". Based on prior research, the executives could be referring to technological competence which often eludes women (e.g. Alegria, 2019; Faulkner, 2014) or some leadership traits that are coded masculine, such as assertiveness (e.g. Blair-Loy and Cech, 2022). The lacking competence of women remains elusive, despite its apparent importance.

Equating gender equality with (increasing) the number/percentage of women can be considered a rather narrow view although it is not surprising. It aligns with mainstream research which proposes that the underrepresentation of women in technology (or STEM) is mainly about numbers (e.g. Bairoh, 2023; Faulkner, 2000; Jansson and Sand, 2021). Other aspects of equality, such as reviewing the current culture or processes from a gender perspective is mentioned by (some) interviewees whereas analysing male privilege is not mentioned. None of the executives in this study discussed attempts to challenge the prevailing culture or gender order. As already suggested, the cultural context (Finland vs Sweden) appears to make a difference albeit both countries can be considered gender-egalitarian on a global scale.

Somewhat surprisingly, the views of the interviewees did not differ remarkably by gender: men and women executives were as (un)likely to support the gender equality targets. As Cortis *et al.* (2022) suggest, privilege and rank may explain more than gender at the higher echelons of organizations. The ingrained ideal of meritocracy is another explanation. As Niemistö *et al.* (2021) point out, many organizations simultaneously operate under the illusion of a gender-neutral meritocracy and view men in senior positions as self-evident representatives of leadership. While some executives acknowledged that there may be bias against women, only few (women) seemed to recognize the opposite, the privileging of men.

While this study explores the responses of executives in ten different technology companies, the number of interviewees in each company was limited. Future studies with larger numbers of respondents could assess to what extent similar responses (endorsing, negotiating or resisting), or potentially some other ways of responding to gender equality

targets, exist among executives and team leaders in technology companies or in other sectors. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyse how these responses are linked to other organizational variables such as structure, culture, and policies.

Conclusions and implications

Drawing on critical feminist theorizing on meritocracy and male privilege in STEM, this study finds that executives can relate to gender equality targets in three ways: they can endorse, negotiate, and resist them. Nonetheless, gender equality targets are trumped by the assumption of meritocracy. In companies with defined targets, executives kept negotiating them and some even distanced themselves from the targets. In other companies, the executives' unwavering confidence in the functioning of the merit-based system rendered gender equality targets unnecessary in their view. The study argues that when executives do not actively support gender equality targets, they are perpetuating male privilege by reinforcing the status quo. In line with O'Brien *et al.* (2023), this study shifts the responsibility for change onto the organizations and executives while problematizing the effectiveness of such approaches (cf., Cortis *et al.*, 2022; Humbert *et al.*, 2018; Wynn, 2020).

The study shows how executives' narrow understanding of gender equality and reliance on the current systems, combined with underlying doubts about the competence of women, hinder the advancement of women to top management. Therefore, the study helps executives understand how similar beliefs may thwart gender equality initiatives in their own companies. The findings also indicate that while setting and announcing targets is vital, it is not sufficient to improve the gender imbalance in technology companies. Executives may resist gender equality targets if these are deemed to violate the principles of meritocracy. If the companies are serious about improving gender equality, they need to engage in thorough discussions on "competence": how it is defined, understood, and measured. To be successful, gender equality initiatives require guidelines, processes and shared understanding of their importance. Wynn (2020) proposes that future change initiatives should focus on providing executives with the structural understanding and organizational framing necessary to execute effective change. Based on the findings of this study, such understanding of the prevailing and persistent gender inequalities is certainly needed in technology companies.

An earlier version of this article has been published as an essay in the author's doctoral dissertation (Bairoh, 2023)

Notes

1. The companies represent the following sectors within technology: industry/manufacturing (5 companies); planning and design (3); IT consulting (1); ICT solutions provider (1). All companies are large or mid-size and five are listed in the Helsinki Stock Exchange.

2. For example: the Finnish word "sukupuoli" means both "sex" and "gender" but has been translated as "gender".

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