

*The Failure of Gender Equality Initiatives in Academia: Exploring Defensive Institutional
Work in Flemish Universities*

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Although a large number of studies have explored the main causes of gender inequality in academia, less attention has been given to the processes underlying the failure of gender equality initiatives to enhance gender representation, especially at the professorial level. We offer a critical discourse analysis of recently promulgated gender policy documents of the five Flemish universities, and demonstrate that defensive institutional work is a fundamental process underlying resistance to gender equality in the academic profession. That is, powerful organizational actors resist gender change by (un)intentionally deploying a combination of discursive strategies that legitimate what we describe as non–time-bound gender equality initiatives: The expected outcomes are undetermined in time, and they de-legitimate concrete, time-bound measures that define specific outcomes against well-defined deadlines. By explicitly bringing a temporal dimension into our analysis, we argue that defensive institutional work deflects questions regarding what ought to be achieved when, and contributes to the slow pace of gender change in academia.

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Time and time again, research shows that gender inequality is a social structure highly resistant to change (Britton 2017; Lee-Gosselin, Briere, and Hawo 2013; Rindfleish and Sheridan 2003). In the academic profession, work done by women tends to be under-recognized, and gender inequality tends to persevere (Rossiter 1993; Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, and Kohvakka 2018). Even as the 21st century unfolds, it is well documented that women struggle more to secure research funding (European Commission 2019) and are still largely underrepresented at the level of full professorship, the highest post within academic institutions (Stepan-Norris and Kerrissey 2016; Winslow and Davis 2016). Despite the fact that across the EU-28 higher education systems, female graduates outnumber male graduates at the Bachelor and Master level and the pool of graduates at the doctoral level is gender balanced, at the top of the academic pyramid women represent on average only 24% of the highest grade of academic staff (13% being the EU-28 minimum), and only five countries

have 40% or more women (European Commission 2019). Obviously, percentages differ significantly by discipline, but the overall picture is telling.

A rich research tradition has explored mechanisms that (re)produce gender inequality within the academic profession (Deem 2003, 2007; Seierstad and Healy 2012; Winslow and Davis 2016). In addition to ascribing the main causes to the life choices of individual women (Marginson and Considine 2000; Thornton 2005), systemic institutional barriers at the organizational and institutional level are observed (Risman 2004). Unconscious biases and masculine discourses of competition and individuality form the subject of investigation because these organizational mechanisms tend to reinforce the difficulties women face during their academic careers (Reuben, Sapienza, and Zingales 2014; Saul 2013). It is also argued that the reward structures within academia tend to value attributes and characteristics typical of men (Currie, Thiele, and Harris 2002). Furthermore, at the institutional level, research demonstrates an increase in temporary, uncertain, and unstable competitive academic positions. This workforce casualization and the precarization of academic jobs particularly affects women in academia (Murgia and Poggio 2018). In addition, institutional ethnography reveals how gendered discourses of passion construct the “ideal academic” in masculine terms; this also explains the lack of resistance against gender inequality at the institutional level (Lund and Tienari 2019). Gendered discourses, policies, and structures continue to reproduce gender asymmetries without much resistance due to a dominance of beliefs that values masculine norms and individual merit (Gill 2017). The effectiveness of remedies for gender inequality has received less research attention. Studies suggest that gender equality initiatives tend to fail due to resistance to or unwillingness to support equality initiatives involving quotas or affirmative action (Van den Brink 2015; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a, 2012b). Although research in the broader context of contemporary organizations indicates that pleas for quotas or affirmative action are often denied by referring to ideals of

merit and individual advancement (Van den Brink and Stobbe 2014), such discursive forms of resistance have not yet been studied in the context of academia. Our research question is: Can discursive resistance be observed in academia regarding gender equality initiatives undertaken at universities; and if so, how does it manifest itself in the context of the academic profession? The question of discursive resistance is situated in the context of the linguistic turn in organization studies (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000), which strongly emphasizes the role of language in the constitution of reality, including the (re)production of gender inequality.

More specifically, we approach this research question by drawing on the concept of “defensive institutional work” as a form of institutional maintenance (Maguire and Hardy 2009; Smink, Hekkert, and Negro 2015). Drawing from current insights in defensive institutional work in the broader context of organization studies (Lefsrud and Meyer 2012; Luyckx and Janssens 2016), we know that the status quo tends to be maintained and reproduced through supporting discursive (de)legitimation strategies. Specifically, to create and maintain situations that are favorable to them, powerful organizational actors use discourses and texts as strategic levers to influence the environment, imposing their vision and meaning of reality on others (Hardy and Maguire 2010; Maguire and Hardy 2009; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Hence, our finding is that discursive (de)legitimation strategies drive the underlying resistance to affirmative action initiatives and thus contribute to the stickiness of gender inequality in the academic profession.

With this in mind, to investigate defensive institutional work and its impact on gender equality initiatives, we examine Gender Action Plans (GAPs): gender policy documents from the five universities in Flanders published in 2014. We triangulate our data with 130 press articles, and 7 preceding and 3 follow-up diversity reports from the Flemish Interuniversity

Council (VLIR). Quotations from the GAPs (below) will note the specific university source. Critical scholars have emphasized the constitutive nature of policy documents, warning that these documents may have a life of their own as “fetish objects” signaling good performance, giving the impression of being on track and expressing commitment, while simultaneously reproducing inequality (Ahmed 2007). To further our understanding of the slow pace of gender change in academia, we conduct a critical discourse analysis and investigate how universities deploy a combination of discursive (de)legitimation strategies in their defensive institutional work against the implementation of affirmative action initiatives.

Our study contributes to the literature on gender (in)equality in academia by demonstrating the discursive underpinnings of resistance to gender change. It also touches on the understanding of how organizational systems and cultures tend to continue to exclude women from equal opportunities (Baker and Kelan 2019).

A THEORETICAL MODEL OF GENDER EQUALITY INITIATIVES

Our theoretical framework is informed by a two-dimensional model of gender equality initiatives as described by Benschop and Verloo (2011) and Benschop and Van den Brink (2014). This model distinguishes among three potential aims of gender initiatives— inclusion, re-valuation, and transformation—and describes how these gender initiatives can target two distinct levels: the individual and the structural (organizational) level.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Within this model, “individual inclusion strategies” focus on inclusion at the individual level through mentoring and training programs, aiming to equip the women so they can “play the game” on a par with men. In this view, women themselves are responsible for their own

inclusion. This liberal approach has been criticized because such type of initiatives mainly benefits white, middle-class women and “target only a few of the players and leave the game and its rules intact” (Benschop and van den Brink 2014, 335). “Managing diversity strategies” focuses on the re-valuation of masculine/feminine relations at the individual level, such as tackling unconscious gender biases to reduce the impact of unintentional and automatic mental associations based on gender. These practices and policies celebrate differences and re-valuate the feminine. However, the strategy of valuing differences remains at the individual level and does not aim to change the hierarchical order within organizations nor does it touch on the (re)distribution of positions of power. At the structural level, “structural transformation strategies,” such as gender mainstreaming initiatives, are strategies that fundamentally transform organizational processes and routines so that they no longer reproduce gender inequality. Examples of mainstreaming include the advocacy of slow scholarship that aims to transform the university from a feminist ethic of care as it advances well-being, autonomy over work hours, and control over speed (Martell 2014), and hereby touches on creating possibilities for a more just university (Hartman and Darab 2012). There is no clear, identifiable end point foreseen to be reached, and experimentation to change the social order goes on continuously. In practice, however, as these indefinite strategies require full commitment, political will, and support from the organization and its key figures, often compromises need to be made resulting in watered-down transformations (Benschop and Verloo 2011). Finally, “structural inclusion strategies” include positive discrimination, affirmative action, measurable targets, and (self-imposed) quotas, which aim for the equality of outcomes and fair proportional representation. Such measures tend to be heavily contested and are broadly perceived as “radical” (Benschop and Van den Brink 2014; Voorspoels 2018). While we acknowledge the radical aspects of such measures, there is also a temporal dimension related to structural inclusion strategies. Targets or (self-imposed) quotas are time-

bound because these aim to achieve measurable results within a relatively short period of time. With this term, we explicitly bring in a temporal dimension in the model of gender equality initiatives as described by Benschop and Verloo (2011) and Benschop and Van den Brink (2014).

Research indicates that such time-bound measures significantly increase the representation of women because such practices focus on results within a given time frame, by assigning responsibility for change to the organization and its management (Busby 2006; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Noon 2010; Roos and Zanoni 2018). Also, motivational theory suggests that group goal-setting is as important as individual goal-setting, and that deadlines improve the effectiveness of goals (Lunenburg 2011). Although the literature on affirmative action shows that it has an effect on increasing numbers of the underrepresented sex, the long-term effects are not always known (Powell 2018). On the flip side of such transparent measures is that these might not address the complexities of intersectional identities (such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability that inform each other, creating unique experiences of discrimination). These also might reinforce gender binaries by comparing women-identified faculty with men-identified faculty, while missing out on the inclusion of gender nonconforming self-identifications. Although none of the above-mentioned strategies, including time-bound structural inclusion strategies, is in itself sufficient to challenge the systems of power in organizations profoundly, all are deemed necessary in the struggle for gender equality (Benschop and van den Brink 2014; Williams and Clowney 2007).

THE DISCURSIVE ASPECTS OF DEFENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL WORK

When institutions are threatened—for example, when male-dominated academies are publicly scrutinized for the underrepresentation of women—incumbent actors may engage in “defensive institutional work” (Maguire and Hardy 2009). To realize institutional change that

affects power relations between groups, it is paramount to overcome such “oppositions and resistance from insiders whose interests are threatened by the abandonment of existing practices” (Maguire and Hardy 2009, 150). These oppositions and resistance are partially aimed at “reproducing existing norms and belief systems” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, 230) and involve the production of texts that contest problematizations of existing practices by “(a) countering assertions of negative impacts of practices; (b) countering categorizations of practices as unethical, undesirable, or inappropriate; and (c) countering calls for regulatory change” (Maguire and Hardy 2009, 169).

In this study, we draw on the notion of defensive institutional work to understand the underlying dynamics of resistance to what we term time-bound gender equality initiatives in which measurable goals are linked to a specific time frame, versus non–time-bound strategies that lack a temporal dimension. In particular, we focus on discursive manifestations of resistance. Such a discursive approach is commonly used in literature on institutional work, as it widely acknowledges that “symbols” such as narratives and tropes, vocabulary, and rhetorical devices are important means to achieve institutional objectives (Hampel, Lawrence, and Tracey 2017). Our study thereby assumes that spoken and written texts constitute social realities. Likewise, discursive strategies can be used as devices to influence institutions (Hampel, Lawrence, and Tracey 2017; Kress 1995). In other words, we consider texts as representing entry points into institutions as they mediate the relationship between discourse and action: They can be used to explicate situations, justify actors, and defend different courses of actions (Hampel, Lawrence, and Tracy 2017).

Discursive forms of institutional work use a combination of symbolic resources (e.g., grand discourses such as vocabulary structuring the social world that exists across multiple fields, identity constructions, or persuasive linguistic devices such as rhetoric) to shape, maintain, or alter institutions (Hampel, Lawrence, and Tracy 2017; Hardy and Maguire

2017). Each of these symbolic resources can be employed for the purpose of discursive legitimation: creating a sense of positive, beneficial, or otherwise acceptable picture of actors, organizational behaviors, practices, and social arrangements (Joutsenvirta 2011). Because discursive legitimation plays a major role in institutionalization processes by (potentially) producing moral legitimacy for existing or new practices (Creed, Scully, and Austin 2002), we focus primarily on this type of institutional work in our empirical analysis of the Gender Action Plans (GAPs) of Flemish universities.

THE CASE OF FLANDERS

Flanders is one of the Belgian regions, with its own legal–administrative arrangements regarding higher education. Although we do not have comparative data on the Belgian regions, the performance of Belgium as a country vis-à-vis gender equality in the highest academic ranks is quite low compared with that of other countries in the European Union (European Commission 2019). The percentage of women among the highest grades of academic staff is low (18.3%; only the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Luxembourg perform worse). The Flemish region is home to five universities: the long-standing comprehensive universities in Leuven and Ghent, and the younger ones in Antwerp, Brussels, and Hasselt.

This regional case offers rich material with which to analyze the defensive institutional work in addressing gender inequality in academia, and resistance to time-bound gender equality initiatives in particular. Until relatively recently, the autonomy of universities was respected and regional policy makers hoped that the institutions themselves would develop appropriate and effective policies to combat gender inequality. However, progress was slow, as Figure 2 shows. The percentage of women decreases as the professional rank increases, and progress made between 1999 and 2013 is very limited despite the promulgation of a first generation of gender equality programs at the Flemish universities.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Policy makers deemed further action was necessary to ensure improvement. A new decree (Flemish Parliament 2012) stipulated quotas for equal representation by gender in advisory committees and administrative bodies. At the same time, the Flemish Minister of Innovation Ingrid Lieten urged universities to take further action, threatening to impose gender quotas for the appointment of professors in case of insufficient gender change. This was taken to heart by the VLIR (a council founded and funded by the five universities). The council has been active in the area of gender equality and agreed that all universities would draft GAPs. Our empirical study is focused on the five GAPs of the Flemish universities that were produced in 2014, which were downloaded from the websites of the respective universities. These GAPs are 15–30 page documents that, broadly speaking, follow a similar format: 1) a presentation of the state of affairs regarding gender; 2) a view on what should be achieved in the longer term; and 3) measures in place or proposed to reach the objectives. We also took into account all seven preceding (1999–2013) equal opportunity reports of these universities and their umbrella organization VLIR (which were downloaded from their website) and 130 media articles (October 1998– June 2019) from the Flemish daily newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Tijd*, *De Morgen*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws en Metro*), reporting on the lack of women at Flemish universities and containing statements of the universities with regard to the unequal gender representation. Our analysis further includes an evaluation reporting on equal opportunities from 2011 through 2013 of the VLIR and two follow-up GAPs produced in 2018 and 2019 (see overview of the analyzed policy documents in Table 1).

(Insert Table 1)

DATA ANALYSIS

The five GAPs and preceding and follow-up reports form our primary source of data to investigate the discursive institutional work contributing to the stickiness of gender inequality in academia. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) on these policy documents and the collected media articles was performed. By labeling, categorizing, and constantly comparing the data and our theoretical framework, we identified recurring discursive (de)legitimation strategies that constitute the defensive institutional work performed by each university.

First, we identified the various gender equality initiatives described in the reports and classified these either as specified in time or as non–time-bound. As a second step, we inductively analyzed the recurring discursive forms of legitimation for the implementation or rejection of the initiatives. We identified all the text fragments that we saw as legitimizing or delegitimizing (the need for) the various gender equality initiatives that were mentioned in the data. With legitimizing, we refer to creating “a sense of positive, beneficial, or otherwise acceptable picture” for ideas, actions, and social arrangements (Joutsenvirta 2011, 59). Delegitimizing, on the other hand, entails the creation of “a sense of negative, unbeneficial, or otherwise unacceptable picture of a certain action or issue” (Joutsenvirta 2011, 59). Going back and forth between the data and literature on discursive legitimation, we further abductively identified several microtextual legitimation strategies in these text fragments, which are labeled in the literature as 1) improvement, 2) authorization, 3) commitment discourse, or 4) rationalization.

By *improvement* we mean texts that contain a comparison between a worse and a better position, thereby implying a laudable movement from the one to the other (Sillince and Brown 2009).

By *authorization* we mean texts that refer to the authority of scientific research (scientific authorization); texts that refer to the authority of law, regulations, texts, reports, or

documents (impersonal authorization); texts that refer to the authority of persons holding expertise (personal authorization); texts that refer to the authority of persons holding political power (political authorization); authority of tradition (Van Leeuwen 2007).

Commitment discourse emphasizes strong support for the entity by the evaluator—for example, announcing future implementation of management practices (inspired by Haack, Schoeneborn, and Wickert 2012).

By *rationalization*, we understand “legitimation by reference to the utility of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity” (Vaara, Tienari and Laurila 2006, 794). In particular, we distinguish between pragmatic rationalization, “referring to practical requirements, constraints or consequences in the politics or economy” and neoliberal rationalization “referring to free market economic logic and norms” (Joutsenvirta 2013, 466). References to merit were coded as neoliberal rationalization, and references to practical concerns regarding the execution and effectiveness of quotas were coded as pragmatic rationalization.

Table 2 presents an overview of the identified discursive legitimation strategies and supporting legitimation devices.

Insert Table 2 about here

THE INNER VOICE OF ACADEMIA: RESISTANCE TO TIME-BOUND GENDER INITIATIVES IN FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES

We found a combination of four groups of discursive (de)legitimation strategies underlying resistance to time-bound gender equality initiatives with measurable outcomes: 1) acknowledgment of gender inequality and the need for “justified action,” 2) diminution of academic managers’ responsibility for gender inequality, 3) de-legitimation of time-bound

gender equality initiatives with measurable outcomes (i.e., structural inclusion via quotas or targets) and 4) legitimization of non–time-bound alternative initiatives without specific measurable outcomes (i.e., individual inclusion, individual re-valuation, and structural transformation).

Our key argument is that the combination of these four discursive strategies effectively contributes to the slow pace of gender change in the academic profession as time-bound gender equality initiatives are resisted, de-legitimated, and consequently not implemented. Conspicuously, it is not the value of gender equality as such that is resisted via these discursive strategies, but rather the particular time-bound gender equality initiatives (such as specific measurable targets and quotas) that are required to ensure actual gender change within a short period of time (Benschop and Van den Brink 2014; Benschop and Verloo 2011).

In the following sections, we present the four groups of discursive (de)legitimation strategies constituting defensive institutional work at the Flemish universities in detail. The first two strategies are interpreted as strategies contributing to the maintenance of organizational legitimacy as the universities feel under threat by the Flemish government's demand to install gender equal advisory and administrative bodies, which are required to comply with the rule of maximum two-thirds of the members belonging to the same gender and the prospect of potential gender quotas for academic appointments. The latter two deployed strategies are related to the (de)legitimation of specific (types of) gender equality initiatives and reveal that a re-distribution of power positions is rendered unthinkable and non-negotiable.

Acknowledgment of Gender Inequality and the Need for Justified Action

Notably, all GAPs acknowledge gender inequality in the academic profession by revealing gender statistics and construct them as problematic and undesirable. The following

explicit example illustrates the acknowledgement of gender inequality and its endurance, especially at the transition from the postdoctoral to the professorial level:

In 1999, the First Equal Opportunities Report of KU Leuven already regretted the limited presence of female professors, especially in the highest ranks of senior academic staff: associate professors and full professors. This situation has gradually improved, but women still remain strongly underrepresented at the senior academic staff level of KU Leuven. (KU Leuven 2014)

From the excerpt above, we observe the notion of improvement in that explicit reference is made to a worse situation in the past. With this discursive device, the identity-threatening situation of gender inequality (i.e., threatening to organizational identity and legitimacy) is downplayed by arguing that more and more women are being recruited as professors.

In general, acknowledgements of gender inequality are supported through or take shape in a wide variety of discursive legitimation devices. In several excerpts, we could, for instance, observe scientific authorization in which the acknowledgement of gender inequality is supported by referring to scientific research that explains the phenomenon or employee surveys that intend to inquire about the preferred human resource practices of academics. The following quotation illustrates how acknowledgement is achieved through references to an employee survey from one of the universities:

At the end of 2009, the university held a personnel survey “Everyone is equal! Or not quite ...” This questionnaire looked at how employees think about diversity and equal opportunities within their own work context, how some measures (or the lack thereof) influence satisfaction and how a diversity policy can be implemented that meets the wishes and needs of every employee. After a certain period (for example five years), a staff survey can be taken again. (UAntwerpen 2014)

Another argument that often appears in the data segments acknowledging gender inequality is that gender inequality is a normal phenomenon in higher education; hence, it not only occurs in the specific universities under investigation in the region of Flanders. In the field of organizational studies, this strategy has also been labeled as normalization or rendering controversial actions or phenomena “normal” or “natural” (Vaara et al. 2006). For instance:

In many countries, women systematically disappear from the higher academic ladder, irrespective of the very different educational and employment systems throughout the academic world. This phenomenon, also known as the leaky pipeline, occurs from the postdoctoral level. (KU Leuven 2014)

All GAPs further acknowledge the need for action to improve on the past and current situation of severe gender imbalances, which we interpret as a discourse of commitment. For instance:

From a humanistic perspective on the equality of women and men, gender policy is a question of justice. “Openness, tolerance and respect for person and society” is an important basic value for VUB. (VUB 2014)

At the request of the Council, the Task Force subsequently developed an interuniversity charter, which was approved by the Council in June 2013. In this charter, the Flemish universities commit to drafting a gender policy plan within each institution and / or update existing plans. (UGent 2014)

The need for action is, in the first quotation, embedded in a moral perspective by referring to the value of justice (i.e., moralization of gender equality). In other excerpts, the value of justice is linked to the so-called business case for diversity:

“Working to achieve gender equality isn’t just the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing to do, too” [quoting Hillary Clinton] The influx of outstanding female students into an academic career simply means to make use of the existing human potential for innovation and excellence. The outflow of promising female PhDs and postdocs, for various reasons, is a brain drain for the institution. (VUB 2014)

It is claimed here that gender equality in the academic profession enhances the quality of university services, which can be considered a rationalization of gender equality. From the perspective of the business case for diversity, human resource managers are pressured to recruit diverse personnel because diversity is perceived as a source of creativity and innovation. Note that this business case argument is also given political authority in this specific excerpt by a quotation from Hillary Clinton.

The acknowledgement of an undesirable situation and the discourse of commitment to improve function are very powerful legitimation strategies for organizations (Elsbach 1994; Elsbach and Sutton 1992), and for universities in particular (Mampaey and Huisman 2016). That is, these are legitimation strategies and devices—not necessarily conscious or intended—that can effectively counteract stakeholder criticism and repair organizational legitimacy in crisis situations. From our CDA perspective, these legitimation strategies help universities save face because they allow these institutions to continue their activities without disrupting institutionalized organizational practices.

Diminution of Academic Managers’ Responsibility for Gender Inequality

Organizational studies research has demonstrated that acknowledgement of an undesirable situation is especially effective in sustaining organizational legitimacy when it is combined with discursive diminution (or even denial) of managerial responsibility (Elsbach and Sutton 1992). In our study, we also found evidence of discursive diminution of academic managers' responsibility for gender inequality. The discursive diminution occurs implicitly, not by explicitly arguing that academic managers are not responsible for gender inequality. To be specific, responsibility for gender inequality is attributed to external processes beyond the control of academic managers (e.g., socialization) or unconscious, unintended, and unmanageable internal processes (e.g., organizational culture). Reference to culture and socialization is, for instance, very obvious in the following excerpt, which is supported with political authorization by referring to a report from the European Commission:

Gender: the social differences or roles that are assigned to women and to men, roles that are taught while growing up, that change over time, and that depend on our culture, ethnic origin, religion, upbringing, class and the geographical, economic and political environment in which we live. These behavioral models determine the norm and influence who we are next to our sex. Gender thus describes the set of characteristics and behaviors expected of men and women by their society, and forms their social identity. This identity differs from culture to culture and according to the period in history (Equal Guide on gender mainstreaming, European Commission, 2004). (UHasselt 2014)

When it comes to unconscious, unintended, and unmanageable internal processes, the GAPs consistently refer to the complexity of managing gender diversity, masculinized organizational cultures, and unintended discrimination in recruitment practices—factors that are all constructed as major barriers to achieving gender equality. In this way, responsibility

is passed on to deeply embedded cultural processes in higher education and its institutions, while the (pro)active role of powerful organizational actors themselves is downplayed. For instance:

Women are less likely to develop an academic career. The limited improvement in the past decades shows that the underlying mechanisms are both cultural and structural in nature. (VUB 2014)

De-Legitimation of Time-Bound Gender Equality Initiatives

As argued previously, the discourse of commitment to improvement requires commitment to the implementation of gender equality initiatives. This commitment is clearly articulated; but conspicuously, all universities selectively focus on the desirability of non-time-bound gender equality initiatives without formulating specific targets and consequences if these expected outcomes are not met. Moreover, they explicitly de-legitimate quotas. Mark Waer, an authoritative person in the highest rank as the rector of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, KU Leuven (2009–2013) commented in 2012 that “quota[s] are insane,,” and thus, not a rational choice to remedy imbalances since “the gender problem is naturally disappearing by itself” (Ysebaert 2013). Swift actions are also perceived as immoral: “Making the entire change in at most a few years, is impossible, because we cannot wipe away the older generations just like that. That would be a shame, of the people, and of the experience” (De Morgen 2019). Further, pragmatic rationalization is the most dominant discursive device to de-legitimate quotas. An example of pragmatic rationalization is as follows:

From the outset, the Flemish rectors expressed their concern about the feasibility and efficiency of these quota measures. Consequently, an interuniversity “High Level Task Force Gender” was established within the VLIR. Their aim was to

develop concrete proposals that are more effective than quotas in the long term and that can count on a larger basis from senior academic staff. To this end, they wrote the “VLIR Action Plan Gender, Women in Academic Careers and University Strategies,” which was presented in March 2013 to ministers in charge Ingrid Lieten and Pascal Smet. Both ministers were enthusiastic and instructed the rectors to work out an individual Gender Action Plan.

(UAntwerpen, 2014)

The argument is that practical constraints limit the implementation of time-bound gender equality initiatives in general and gender quotas in particular. This pragmatic rationalization strategy is strengthened by combining it with personal, impersonal, and political authorization: The Flemish rectors, the VLIR, and powerful politicians are constructed as the actors who support the quota ban. Conspicuously, none of the GAPs explained why quotas would be ineffective. That is, quotas are discursively linked with ineffectiveness and unsustainability, without further clarification or elaboration. In organizational studies, this strategic or pragmatic ambiguity in organizational communication (Eisenberg 1984; Giroux 2006) is considered one of the most important strategies to minimize tensions among stakeholders and to keep privileges in place. The fact that the reasons for this supposed ineffectiveness of quotas are not explicated further reflects a recurring aversion to positive discrimination amongst the elite in Belgium because it touches on institutionalized power relations (Roos and Zanoni 2018).

In the case of neoliberal rationalization, quotas are constructed as contradicting neoliberal values of institutional autonomy, transparency, meritocracy, and self-enhancement. From a meritocratic point of view, selection of academic staff members can only be the result of an assessment of the quality of the candidate as the best available human resource on the

academic labor market in terms of research merits. Gender quotas are constructed as contradictory to this principle, which is quite explicitly formulated in the following excerpt:

In the case of quality assessments in a competitive context (in appointments and promotions), there can be no question of pure quotas. In an academic culture, the use of quotas or other forms of positive discrimination create a negative backlash, in which the selected candidates are given the stigma that they have not been selected for the sake of academic qualities but for the sake of gender. (KU Leuven 2014)

Because backlash is expected, such time-bound measures are perceived as being contradictory to the values of the neoliberal competitive market. There is a concern that if measures were implemented that are not in line with neoliberal values, practices, or assessments, the reputation and status of all (female) academics, and the entire university would be stained.

Although the GAPs (and follow-up reports) consistently delegitimized time-bound gender equality initiatives under the form of quotas, consensus over their inappropriateness for academia seemed to crumble somewhat from 2017 onward. The necessity of gender quotas was, for instance, defended by candidates for the rector's elections at Ghent University and, more important, in the public announcement by Rector Caroline Pauwels of the Free University of Brussels that her university would start implementing gender quotas for academic recruitment:

For me it is crystal clear that we can only tackle the appalling underrepresentation of one gender among our professors with gender quotas. Because the underrepresentation is structural. Because it is inexplicable based on any criteria that matter, such as excellence in your field and being able to present

an excellent scientific track record. And because all the measures we have taken in recent years have not delivered the hoped-for results (Pauwels 2017).

However, Pauwels revoked her intentions regarding gender quotas in February 2019, by stating that “being too radical is often counterproductive” (Selfslagh 2019) and referring to a lack of acceptance among academic staff. Instead, the University of Brussels decided to support a new gender charter (titled *Gender in Academia*, 26 June 2019) developed by the VLIR and the Young Academy (an organization of socially committed young academics), which emphasizes the necessity of policy measures to avoid gender bias among academic staff and a closer quantitative monitoring of gender progress at Flemish universities. This charter, however, does not make any reference to the necessity of time-bound gender equality initiatives in the academic recruitment process.

Legitimation of Non–Time-Bound Gender Equality Initiatives

Finally, whereas time-bound gender equality initiatives are consistently delegitimized, non–time-bound initiatives are legitimated, mainly based on pragmatic rationalization and different types of authorizations. In the GAPs, several types of authorizations are combined to legitimate these initiatives; in this way, the initiatives are naturalized by being presented as the only way out. Scientific authorization is consistently deployed in all GAPs. For example:

In the spring of 2013, the Task Force published a report analyzing the gender issues of academic staff at universities in particular. In the report, which is scientifically grounded and refers to an international framework, the emphasis is on cultural change as a necessary condition for a sustainable gender policy. (UGent 2014)

Here, an authority (a “Task Force”) legitimates a non–time-bound gender equality initiative based on scientific authorization, which points here to structural transformation (a “cultural change”). Reference to scientific reports is dominant throughout the GAPs, but we also found another type of scientific authorization. In particular, reference is made to research and audits that will be conducted in the future (e.g., monitoring and evaluation) to guarantee the positive effects of the proposed initiatives. This future in which studies and further research is imagined to occur, is, however, undetermined, open, and undefined.

We also found personal and political authorizations. Personal authorizations often refer to so-called experts advocating for the proposed non–time-bound gender equality initiatives. For instance, the GAP of the University of Antwerp refers to a multidisciplinary group of experts responsible for the proposed initiatives, which are not specified in time. Nor do they mention any consequences or sanctions in case the proposed measures are not executed, nor whether any specific evaluations of the proposed measures are intended. However, it is explicitly stressed that this group acts by order of powerful politicians and is thus to be considered as legitimate:

Under the authority of Minister Smet and Minister Lieten ... The Academic Steering Group on Equal Opportunities and Diversity prepared the plan of the University of Antwerp. The Steering Committee is composed of: [list of professors]. (UAntwerpen 2014)

The proposed non–time-specific and long-term gender equality initiatives both on the individual (e.g., mentoring, training, and career coaching) and structural level (e.g., a gender conscious and family-friendly organizational culture, rethinking of international mobility, and work–life balance facilities) are constructed as embedded in a “sustainable” and “integrated” organizational policy that is related to the organization’s human resource management

practices. Non–time-specific gender equality initiatives are discursively linked with sustainability, without further clarification of this link:

The strategic action plan “sustainable gender policy” is not a separate document, but will be embedded in an integrated diversity policy. (UAntwerpen 2014)

An anchored gender policy is required if one wants to achieve a sustainable cultural change and to create a working environment in which “our employees are cherished and they are given maximum opportunities to develop themselves and to grow” (core value). A very demanding position as an academic researcher (high work and publication pressure, job insecurity, highly motivated competition, etc.) is more and more seen as less attractive. There is a risk that the academic world—as an employer—loses its competitiveness on the labor market. It would be very unfortunate if women only fully enter the academic world at a time when the profession loses status, cf. teachers and general practitioners. (VUB 2014)

This last quotation further makes a clear reference to the hypercompetitive context in which academic institutions are currently operating. Therefore, it is argued that “an anchored gender policy” (i.e., one that does not include gender quotas) is required in order to remain competitive. In this quotation, the university expresses a fear that an increase of women within academia would diminish the status of the academic profession, similar to what happened before in the educational sector among teachers and within medicine among doctors working as general practitioners. Therefore, it legitimizes its gender equality program, which does not include quotas or any other time-bound gender equality initiative, as

it is the only way the university can operate without “losing its competitiveness on the labor market.”

DISCUSSION

Our analysis has shown that Flemish universities actively engage in discursive legitimation to support their policies and actions in which “gender” is instrumentalized to maintain and reproduce gendered structural inequalities. In the GAPs, we found many instances of the acknowledgment of gender inequality and the need for action. However, this awareness and recognition were accompanied by a diminution of academic managers’ responsibility for gender inequality, a consistent de-legitimation of time-bound gender equality initiatives, and legitimation of alternative, non–time-specific gender equality initiatives with unclear defined outcomes in time. All universities circumvent well-defined “hard,” time-bound measures and targets by using language that reflects the internalization of presumed gender-neutral ideas of meritocracy. By stating that quotas are contradictory to meritocracy, a notion that carries masculine associations (Powell 2018), all time-bound measures are constructed as “radical” and unfit within an academic environment. However, scientific evidence or further justification is not offered for these claims. Interestingly, in the academic literature, considerable support can be found for the efficacy of practices that assign organizational responsibility for change (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006) and the effectiveness of gender quotas in various sectors within a well-defined period of time (Engelstad and Teigen 2012; Roos and Zanoni 2018). It is paradoxical, even ironic, that knowledge-based organizations such as universities, with access to such a wealth of solid research, selectively ignore these sources when they reflect on their own institutional practices. This demonstrates the significance of discourse and its legitimations in generating or halting change efforts.

The universities show limited levels of responsibility by referring to the complexity of the problem, to the external factors that contribute to the inequality problem, and to intangible factors such as organizational culture. Overall, these discourses legitimate the universities' claim that they have only limited powers and opportunities to bring about change. The discursive (de)legitimation strategies contribute to the selective implementation of non-time-bound gender equality initiatives (setting up task forces, offering relatively vague initiatives such as "sustainable" gender policies). Scientific authorization is often used to support non-time bound initiatives, which—in light of our understanding of the extensive body of research on gender equality—suggests that universities are cherry-picking from the rich literature to support their stance. On the whole, the legitimization discourses sustain the slow pace of gender change in academia, with GAPs lacking teeth to tackle persistent structural inequalities.

Our analysis adds to our understanding of gender inequality in academia and the role of discourses and discursive legitimation strategies in the reproduction or maintenance of male-dominated academia as a contemporary institution. In particular, our study shows how seemingly emancipatory discourses can be highly problematic and may unintentionally contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in academia. Furthermore, whereas previous studies have—rightly—focused on individual and interactional levels to explain inequality, our study particularly adds to the understanding of why inequality is persistent: It is because universities are not willing or able to act on, or are not sufficiently aware of, the clear signals that point to a need for more "radical" time-bound strategies or at least a combination of initiatives at the individual and structural level that include both long-term and short-term goals. As Benschop and Van den Brink (2014, 347) state, the "combination of inclusive and transformational interventions lead to a synergy that is the most promising strategy for change"—a claim that is supported in several reviews of the literature on gender diversity and

inclusion (Kang and Kaplan 2019; Williams and Clowney 2007). To generate change, alternative discourses are needed to rethink how to remedy gender imbalances in academia.

CONCLUSION

Our research offers insights in how the production and consumption of policy texts—in our case GAPs—maintain institutions and the status quo. By analyzing the discursive activity of universities regarding the persistence of gender inequality in academia, we found interacting strategies that legitimate the slow pace of gender equality. From the literature we know that the most effective programs do not use coercion, but engage people in working for diversity by increasing their exposure and contact with women and minorities, and encourage social accountability for change by tapping into their desire to look good to others (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). Therefore, new discourses are needed to design an inclusive university. Our analysis touches on power in institutional processes, which clearly surfaces in the analysis of the various legitimation strategies deployed and even in the quotations that discuss the status of the academic profession. Thus, through the psychological processes of cognitive dissonance, actors tend to align themselves with dominant discourses. As a result, by understanding the underlying discursive dynamics better, alternative or competing discourses can emerge to induce voluntary change (Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy 2004; Roos and Zanoni 2018).

We would argue that institutional work composed of 1) acknowledgment of gender inequality, 2) increased responsibility of universities and their managers, and 3) time-bound actions with concrete outcomes is productive for change because it opens up a space of discussion of the underlying, masculine values that drive the production and evaluation of academic output. We will gain insight into possibilities for further awareness-raising by fostering more stakeholder commitment to implementing truly inclusive gender equality policies. Time-bound policies make universities responsible for the achievement of their

goals. It is up to all of us to hold universities accountable for adhering to values that disguise and maintain the institutionalized gender inequality, to request transparency, and to keep questioning why things are not changing faster.

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[Figures and tables]

	Inclusion	Re-valuation	Transformation
Individual	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Managing diversity</i>	
Structural	AFFIRMATIVE ACTION & QUOTA		<i>Gender Mainstreaming</i>

Figure 1. Two-dimensional model of gender equality initiatives. Non-time-specific, indefinite, and long-term initiatives are in italics and time-bound initiatives in bold. Adapted from Benschop and Verloo (2011, p. 280).

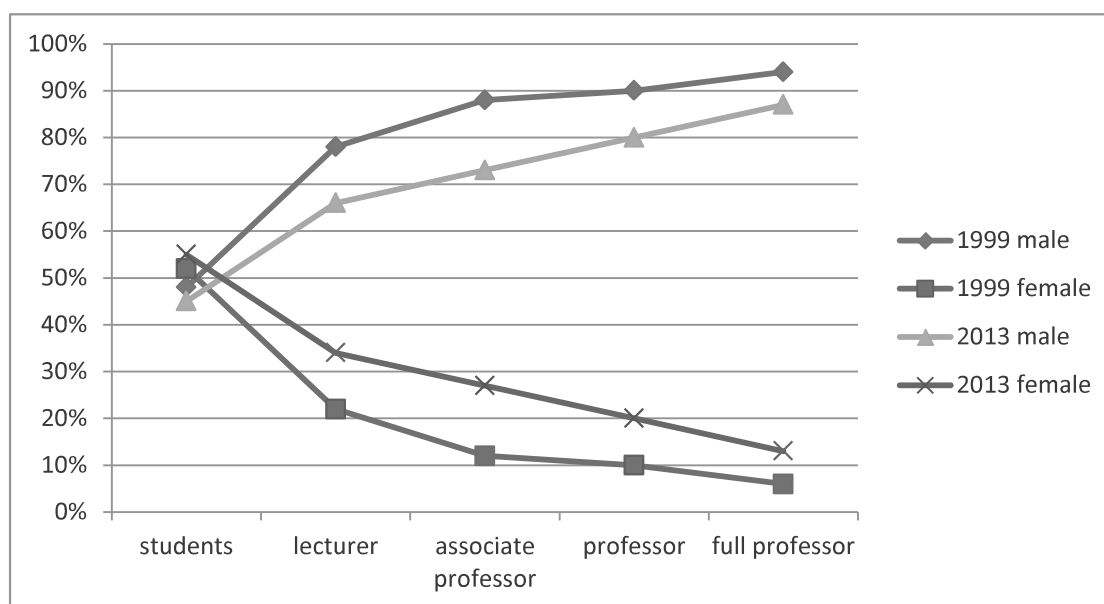


Figure 2: Representation in different academic positions (by gender, 1999 and 2013). Source: Flemish Interuniversity Council.

Table 1: General overview of documents used for analysis

<i>Timeline documents</i>	<i>Document title and source</i>	<i>Suggested gender equality initiatives</i>	<i>Indicated time frame</i>
1999	KU Leuven First Equal Opportunities Report	Gender mainstreaming Explicitly against quota No targets formulated	“very long term”
2002	Report Equal Opportunities VLIR	Individually centered gender equality initiatives Transformative gender equality initiatives 2/3 rule target of postdocs per discipline/faculty	No time frame
2005	Report Equal Opportunities VLIR	Individually centered gender equality initiatives Transformative gender equality initiatives	“in the future” No defined time frame

		Recommendation: to work with realistic targets	
2009	Guide for Equal Opportunities VLIR	Goal: to support universities with the development of a gender-neutral HR instrument and to help universities with the implementation of gender mainstreaming.	Retrospective: exchange of current good practices at universities and how these can be implemented at other institutions (in the undefined future).
2010	Report Equal Opportunities VLIR	Observation: The enforceability of a diversity policy with clear targets is absent. Universities are not rewarded for their efforts for equal opportunities and diversity, nor sanctioned. To speed up success: to consider imposing quotas on the composition of appointment and promotion councils. “And why shouldn't a quota be set for the global ZAP personnel plan of a university?” (p. 100)	Retrospective Suggestion for the (undefined) future: introduction of quota for the composition of councils to speed up success, as well as implementation of rewards and sanctions.
2012	Action plan Gender Higher Education	Pro quota councils and commissions (2/3 rule): considered to be essential of universities' strategic plan Stress on autonomy of universities to implement (non-time-bound) gender equality initiatives: structural transformational and individually centered.	The VLIR insists that universities will translate strategic policies in operational goals with specific terms indicated to realize its ambitions.
2013	VLIR Action plan Gender. Women in the academic career trajectory and the university policy.	Stress on autonomy of the various universities: “The responsibility for gender policy and cultural change lies with the institutions themselves.” (p. 14)	In response to the decrees of 2012: These implement quota for composition of advisory and administrative bodies at universities.

2014	Gender action plans of the 5 universities	See table 2 for detailed analysis.	<p>The provision of a tentative time path for the introduction of suggested measures depends from university to university. Some universities are more vague than others.</p> <p>None of the universities indicate what they intend to achieve with particular measures within a specific period of time.</p>
2015	Evaluation Report Equal Opportunities VLIR 2011-2013	Stress on mainstreaming as the main strategy for diversity in general.	Overview of initiatives in the past.
2018	VLIR Equal Opportunities and Diversity	Plea for inclusion and mainstreaming.	Planning of a gender monitoring report to be published in 2019.
26 June 2019	VLIR-JA charter – (VLIR - Young Academy charter)	<p>Progress report: “However, if the current course is maintained, it will take at least until 2050 before there can be a real gender balance among the academic staff of the Flemish universities.” (p. 5)</p> <p>Attention to nonbinary gender identities.</p> <p>In addition to equal representation among advisory and administrative bodies, there is attention to 2/3 representation among the candidate pool.</p> <p>Gender equality means 40%</p>	Very concrete tools and suggestions for the future, but no explicit time frame, and not coercive, as there are no explicit sanctions or rewards.

	representation (cf. EU report of 2019).	
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Table 2. Discursive (de)legitimation strategies to resist radical gender change in Flemish universities

<i>(De)legitimation strategies</i>	<i>Deployed language of legitimation /legitimation devices</i>
Acknowledgment of gender inequality and the need for action	Improvement Authorization: scientific; impersonal; authority of tradition Commitment discourse Neoliberal rationalization
Diminution of academic managers' responsibility for gender inequality	Authorization: authority of tradition; political authorization
De-legitimation of time bound gender equality initiatives (quota, targets)	Rationalization: pragmatic; neoliberal Authorization: personal; impersonal; political
Legitimation of non–time-bound gender equality initiatives Transformative gender equality initiatives (structural/transformational; e.g. gender mainstreaming such as rethinking international mobility) Individually centered gender equality initiatives (individual/inclusion; e.g., mentoring, training, career counseling)	Rationalization: pragmatic; neoliberal Authorization: personal; scientific; authority of tradition; political