Negotiating meritocracy and gender equality across organisational spaces: the case of a tenure track system

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Abstract

In this article, we study how meritocratic systems and gender equality concerns are negotiated across different organisational spaces in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Based on a case study of the organising of a tenure track system in a Swedish university, we suggest that the intersection of meritocratic processes and gender equality work can be analysed as a set of negotiated orders in these spaces. This fragmentation may imply problems for advancing gender equality agendas in relation to established notions of meritocracy but may also imply opportunities for change as existing organisational spaces can be reconstructed or new ones created. Our notions of fragmentation and negotiated orders thereby suggest that the current situation is both stable and legitimate and that re-negotiations need to involve reconstructions of the various spaces and not only interventions into them.

Keywords Gender equality · Negotiated order · Organisational spaces · Organisational fragmentation · Universities

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Introduction

It has repeatedly been established that meritocratic systems in HEIs tend to recognise and reward men through informal networking, idealisation of masculine work habits, and gender-biased ways of measuring performance and excellence (cf., van den Brink & Benschop, 2014; Clarke et al., 2024). These insights have gradually inspired HEIs in many countries to identify gender equality amongst both academic staff and students as a strategic development area (Bleijenbergh, 2024) — including articulating and amending aspects of meritocratic practices that yield questionable results (Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). Such initiatives tend to be both resisted and lauded within HEIs, depending on how actors view the relation between meritocracy and gender equality (Roos et al., 2020; Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

In this article, we take an interest in how meritocracy and gender equality are co-constructed in managerial work in HEIs. Building on earlier research emphasising, e.g. organisational decoupling (Nielsen, 2021), micro-politics (Yarrow, 2021), and gendered differences in compliance (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024) as explanations of how inequalities are produced and reproduced in meritocratic systems, we suggest that HEI organisations can be analysed as fragmented into different organisational spaces (Halford & Leonard, 2006), in which different negotiated orders unfold (Modell, 2006). Such a perspective implies fieldwork inquiry into actors' subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of what is appropriate, legitimate, and thinkable to say, and that these interpretations differ across various formal and informal contexts and situations in organisational life.

Our analysis is based on a case study of the organisational spaces involved in managing a tenure-track system in a Swedish university. We identify a set of spaces in the fragmented organisation in which discussions and decisions relating to the tenure track happen and then present an analysis of the negotiated order of meritocracy and gender equality in these spaces. We show that there are differences between spaces in how actors negotiate meritocracy and gender, and that this fragmentation tends to sustain extant inequalities. At the same time, recontextualization — i.e. reconstructing spaces or creating new ones — may imply possibilities for change.

The article is structured as follows: first, we review the literature, starting with the concept of meritocracy as related to gender equality in academia and then detailing our perspective on meritocracy and gender equality as unfolding through negotiations in fragmented HEI organisations. Following a review of our research methods, we then discuss our findings.

Meritocracy and gender equality in fragmented HEIs

A considerable body of research has scrutinised the implementation of meritocracy in HEIs, often revealing that meritocratic systems tend to favour already advantaged groups rather than fulfilling promises of fairness, neutrality, and impartiality (Liu, 2011; Castilla & Benard, 2010). What is perceived as 'merit' is not always stable, transparent, and formalised — but rather contingent on who is being evaluated, the context of the evaluation, and the institutional logics applied (Liu, 2011; Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021; Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). It has been repeatedly demonstrated that ostensibly neutral concepts and systems for defining and evaluating merits are practiced in

a gender-biased manner (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014; Fagan & Teasdale, 2021; Yarrow, 2021) as they are constructed around the normalised experiences of privileged men (Svedberg Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019; Lagesen & Suboticki, 2023), including elusive masculine characteristics such as work ethics, braggadocio, and social media visibility (Lund & Tienari, 2019).

Driven by ambitions to enhance the fairness of meritocratic systems, several HEIs worldwide have indeed taken actions to counteract biases and inequalities. Examples of such initiatives include career support and mentorship programs for women, family-friendly career models, diversity and inclusion training, and requirements for gender-balanced composition of decision-makers, expert assessors, managers, and journal editors (Bleijenbergh, 2024; Snickare & Wahl, 2024). Such initiatives often involve amendments to formal meritocratic procedures to strengthen accountability and transparency, reduce managerial subjectivity in decision-making, regulate recruitment and promotion processes, and provide underprivileged groups with the formal benefits that are already informally available to privileged ones (Roos et al., 2020).

Many initiatives encounter resistance — for instance, by framing gender equality as an eternal and inevitable global problem rather than urging managers to set targets, develop activities, and conduct evaluations (Roos et al., 2020), or by citing other, more pressing circumstances such as financial precarities or claimed imbalances between different subject areas. Several initiatives — such as career support programs exclusively for women — have also faced criticism for 'fixing the women' rather than addressing structural issues (Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

When broken down into their components, meritocratic systems comprise numerous regulations, decisions, and assessments — involving a large number of managers and administrators across various boards and committees. Consequently, these systems encompass several contexts and situations where written regulations, traditions, power relations, and professional judgments shape discussions and decisions relating to meritocracy and gender equality. We therefore propose that the workings of meritocratic systems cannot be studied solely through formal organisational regulations and decisions but also need to consider actors' lived experiences (Taylor & Spicer, 2007) of what is possible and legitimate to do and say in different 'organisational spaces' — that is, contexts and situations. We build or notion of organisational spaces on Halford and Leonard's (2006) theorising on how workplace subjectivities need to be analysed as embedded and contextualised. They suggest that '[o]rganizations are themselves configurations of multiple, distinctive and differentiated spaces offering different potentials for subjectivities' (p. 661), pointing at the importance of understanding recontextualization — i.e. that meanings are not unitary, fixed, and stable but rather renegotiated as individuals become situated in new temporal, spatial, and political contexts. This implies that empirical fieldwork needs to involve archival research into documents and regulative systems, as well as explorations of subjective times and spaces of actors' everyday lives.

Organisational fragmentation in HEIs has indeed been the subject of prior discussions — emphasising that university organisations are simultaneously fragmented and integrated (cf., Becher & Trowler, 2001). HEIs are culturally complex; this complexity manifests differently in various situations, with the processing of organisational matters guided more by actors' subjective experiences of what is legitimate and feasible in situ, rather than by unequivocal general norms and standards. Simultaneously, as indicated by Svedberg Helgesson and Sjögren (2019), it does not entail total decoupling — meritocratic systems are practiced in various fora with different underlying values and norms but also through significant organisational integration and regulation between these fora.

Formal procedures and organisational structures regulating spatial arrangements are thus of interest but also the dominant or suppressed interpretations of these structures in various social situations. Social interactions in organisational spaces thereby produce and reproduce negotiated orders (Strauss, 1982), i.e. 'manifestations of explicit or implicit negotiations, subsuming notions such as bargaining, mediation, collusion and compromise, between actors with more or less competing interests' (Modell, 2006).

Fragmentation does not imply that anything can occur in an organisational space. Negotiations still occur within a set of norms and traditions in the HEI sector related to meritocracy and gender equality. Additionally, different actors are not equally recognised in the situation — they invoke interpretations and discourses that are valued to differing extents (Halford & Leonard, 2006), and some debates and agreements occur outside the formal space (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Yarrow, 2021). Furthermore, it is essential to consider the different goals and stakes held by negotiating actors and the extent to which individual actors comply (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024).

Negotiated orders have consequences; different 'versions' of negotiations may continue to coexist within the organisation. Gender equality concerns will be negotiated in relation to meritocracy in various ways in different organisational spaces — underscoring the importance of understanding the core aspects of the resulting negotiated orders for possible re-negotiations (Modell, 2006). As noted, for instance, by Svensson (1996) in his study of physicians and nurses interacting in multiple places within hospitals, resulting negotiated orders typically tend to favour masculinities over femininities, high-status professions over low-status professions, and homosocial informality over formalised meeting formats. The implication of this reasoning is that the HEI may not harbour a unified and integrated view of meritocracy and gender equality. Instead, we will need to engage with several negotiated orders that are both fragmented and overlapping.

Meritocracy and gender equality: a case study of a tenure track system

We approached a public sector university in Sweden officially striving to counteract extant gender imbalances in their faculty. The university had a tradition of being visibly male-dominated in all academic employment categories as well as amongst undergraduate and graduate students, partly due to having several faculties with a strong STEM tradition. The internal ambition to alleviate these gender imbalances gained further impetus in 2016, when the Swedish government explicitly required all public sector HEIs to integrate gender equality in several core areas such as students' choice of subject areas, forms and contents of teaching, career paths for faculty, internal resource distribution, and assessment and evaluation procedures (Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

The creation of a tenure track system implied a detailed central regulation of recruitments and promotions, and the identification of a preferred career path involving the positions of assistant, associate, and full professor. The system did not include any equal opportunities/affirmative action schemes or quotas due to Swedish workplace legislation. The underlying assumption was that a more regulated system would increase fairness and better enable the university to recruit, retain, and promote the best talents irrespective of gender and ethnicity (Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021). Earlier practices of favouritism and homosocial networking were thereby to be prevented and faded away. As the academics employed in the tenure track were to be offered career development programs, mentorship, leadership training, and education in gender and diversity

management, the system was also designed to gradually affect cultural values amongst faculty and to foster a new generation of academic leaders aware of possible biases and discrimination. During the years before and after our fieldwork, women accounted for about 30% of those employed as assistant professors — a proportion remaining amongst those later being promoted to associate professor.

The tenure track system was formally regulated in the University Employment Order (UEO) document, which identified not only procedures for employments and promotions but also managerial roles, formal bodies, and mandates. The 'Provost' had a leading role in university-central bodies. Each Faculty had a designated tenure track, a responsible professor, usually the vice-dean, tasked with having a Faculty-wide and long-term perspective on competence development and recruitment and chairing a staffing board. The tenure track system became to be practiced in several different formal organisational spaces with different functions.

In order to study lived experiences of how gender equality and meritocracy were negotiated in the different organisational spaces related to the tenure track, we started out by carrying out semi-structured interviews with senior professors currently or previously holding membership in formal bodies regulated in the UEO. Most of the senior managers and professors held positions in several organisational spaces in parallel. Additional organisational spaces were added by recommendation from these informants. The spaces thereby identified were (1) the University Employment Board, (2) the Tenure Track Team, (3) the Staffing Boards of the Faculties, (4) the Development Program (university-wide career support program for assistant professors), and (5) Faculty/department-level spaces.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were held with a number of early-career scholars employed as assistant professors in the tenure track and informants in the central development program that appeared to be one of the organisational spaces of interest. The total set of informants ($n = 25$, 17 women, 8 men) were thus gradually selected to represent different possible organisational spaces relevant to the practicing of the tenure track system. They are listed in Table 1.

Given that what is possible to say, think, and discuss in one organisational space may well be impossible or indeed unthinkable for the same actors in another (Halford & Leonard, 2006), we wanted to study how these actors understood their own personal roles and the specific context (e.g. a promotion committee or a management team meeting) in which these interactions take place (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Given that we were not allowed to do participant observations in the various meetings, we organised the data collection as a series of semi-structured interviews. While this implied a reliance on retrospective rather than process data, it enabled us to elicit individual stories and ask follow-up questions.

Informants were recruited through direct contact with each individual, who was informed about our research interest in gender equality, meritocracy, and organisational change in HEIs. All individuals contacted agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the university campus, lasted for 1 to 2 h with each person, and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Quotations used in this text were translated into English. Given the basic empirical question on how gender is invoked in meritocratic processes across organisational spaces, each interview evolved around a number of themes derived from the earlier studies discussed above, such as experiences of how merit evaluations, promotions, and gender equality work were handled in various situations and contexts. Informants were asked to describe the formal and informal spaces in which important discussions and decisions related to the tenure track happened and encouraged to raise and pursue emergent aspects salient to their experiences. They were also encouraged to share examples of their collective handling of matters relating to individuals

Table 1 List of informants

Pseudonym of informant	Gender	Formal positions/membership (at the time of empirical fieldwork)
Andrew	M	Professor, Vice-Dean of Faculty, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
Asta	F	Associate professor, member of Faculty staffing board, former member of grant priority sub-committee
Caroline	F	Gender equality officer, central HRM dept, secretary to the tenure track team
Claire	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic
Constantia	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic
Elise	F	Senior gender equality officer, central HRM dept. secretary to the central employment board
Emma	F	Professor, Vice-Dean of Faculty, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
Felicia	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic, currently in the development program
Fredric	M	Professor, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
George	M	Associate professor, head of department, member of Faculty staffing board
Howard	M	Professor, Vice-Dean of Faculty, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
Jemima	F	Associate professor, member of Faculty staffing board, former leader of the development program
Karen	F	Professor, Vice-Dean of Faculty, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
Lara	F	Professor, member of central employment board, member of Faculty staffing board
Lizzy	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic
Marcus	M	Assistant professor, tenure track academic
Mary	F	Professor, leader of the development program
Minnie	F	Associate professor, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, mentor in the development program
Nicolas	M	Assistant professor, tenure track academic, currently in the development program
Onslow	M	Professor, Dean of Faculty, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team
Portia	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic, currently in the development program

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym of informant	Gender	Formal positions/membership (at the time of empirical fieldwork)
Sharon	F	Associate professor, Faculty tenure track responsible, member of the tenure track team, chair of Faculty staffing board
Sophie	F	Assistant professor, tenure track academic
Stephen	M	Professor, university provost, chair of the central employment board, chair of the tenure track team
Winona	F	Professor, former Faculty tenure track responsible, chair of the female faculty network, mentor in the development program

— such as recruitment, promotion, or grant prioritisation — as instances of negotiation and production/reproduction of cultural values linked to meritocracy and gender.

After establishing the subjectively experienced characteristics of the various organisational spaces — including both their formal/structural function and on-going informal interactions and micro-politics — the authors independently performed an initial thematization of aspects of the negotiated orders in these spaces. We identified four aspects of the negotiated order across the studied organisational spaces where meritocracy and gender equality are concerned: (1) individual vs. structural views, (2) varying adaptation of meritocratic strategies and regulation in different organisational spaces, (3) selective translation of meritocratic strategies and regulations in between organisational spaces, and (4) sustaining gendered divides through tokenism and homosociality.

Findings: Fragmentation into different organisational spaces

In this section, we will present actors' lived experiences from the identified organisational spaces, along with illustrative quotes from the interviews. The main characteristics of these spaces are summarised in Table 2 and expanded on below.

The university appointments board

 The board owns the UEO and the tenure track system by delegation from the university president and makes two types of decisions: (1) allowing or turning down Faculties' applications for new tenure track positions and (2) allowing or turning down individual promotion applications. In both cases, the UEO contains prescriptions related to gender equality. Positions shall be prepared by a recruitment team consisting of both men and women, Faculties shall reach out to both female and male potential applicants, and boards should assign both female and male external assessors. Promotion applicants are seen as future academic leaders in the university and are evaluated also on their knowledge and experience of leadership, academic citizenship, and gender equality. The board is assisted by senior HR officials, who prepare all matters, issues, and recommendations and also sometimes take action in the room to ensure that all procedures in the UEO are followed.

According to our informants, gender-related negotiations took place frequently in this space, for example when Faculties failed to attend to the gender aspect when preparing position proposals, when promotion candidates were evaluated by the board on their knowledge and experience of gender equality work, or when Faculties' long-term staffing plans were scrutinised. A frequent dilemma and source of internal conflict in the board was how to weigh gender aspects against more traditional aspects related to research and teaching — i.e. at what point is the gender aspect so poorly attended to that the board can turn down a position proposal or promotion application despite research and teaching criteria having been fulfilled? In this quote, the provost suggested that it was not fully legitimate to link meritocracy and gender equality in all situations:

> Gender equality is a central concern for the board, and we have the formal authority and power to act upon it. Situations are different, of course. If a Faculty staffing board can't describe how the gender aspect has been taken into account, we send it back to them and tell them to revise. It is much harder when we sit in front of a promotion candidate who have passed all hurdles, and it is just us and our interview

Table 2 Organisational spaces studied

Formal/informal spaces	Informants (pseudonyms)	Members' interpretation of organisational space	Member's interpretation of meritocracy	Members' interpretation of gender equality
University employment board. Chaired by the university provost. Members: Senior professors from the different Faculties.	Stephen (chairperson). Lara (member). Elise (secretary).	Guardians and interpretators of the UEO and the tenure track system in relation to Faculties and Departments. Responsibility to uphold scientific quality in all decisions. Members mainly act in the interest of the university as a whole.	The UEO, if applied correctly, guarantees fair and transparent recruitment and promotion decisions. Faculties and departments have a history of prioritising internal candidates and cannot be fully trusted. Merit includes experiences of leadership and gender equality work.	Gender equality is a core matter of developing scientific quality. UEO procedures contain regulations related to gender. Gender equality shall be a consideration present in all decisions. Knowledge on gender equality part of merit.
Tenure track team. Informal discussion group. Chaired by the university provost. Members: Tenure track responsible professors from the Faculties.	Stephen (chairperson). Andrew, Emma, Fredric, Howard, Karen, Minnie, Onslow, Sharon (members). Winona (former member). Caroline (secretary).	Forum for open and honest discussions, offers tenure track responsible professors support and advice in managing recruitment boards and staff planning.	The UEO is a source of order and predictability, but individual decisions may call for both more rigidity or more flexibility. Departments cannot be fully trusted to apply the UEO. Leadership experience part of merit.	Gender equality is a central and important aspect of staffing processes. Sometimes it complicates matters, but it is worth the effort. Experience of gender equality part of merit, but not as important as research and leadership skills.
Faculty staffing boards. Each Faculty has a staffing board, chaired by the tenure track responsible professor. Members: Department-level managers/teachers.	Andrew, Emma, Fredric, Howard, Karen, Minnie, Onslow, Sharon, Winona (chairpersons). Asta, George, Jemima, Lara (members).	Providing staff-related decision-making for Faculty departments and identifying matters to bring up with the university employment board. Members act in the interest of their departments, rarely the university as a whole.	Tenure track employments are complicated and expensive. The UEO is to be followed, but complicates things. Merit is a matter of teaching and research, and is best judged by department professors and subject area experts.	Gender equality is a university-wide concern which may cause problems in relation to department-level needs. The UEO enable actors to voice gender equality concerns. Gender equality experiences rarely an important consideration in recruitment and promotion matters.

Table 2 (continued)

Formal/informal spaces	Informants (pseudonyms)	Members' interpretation of organisational space	Member's interpretation of meritocracy	Members' interpretation of gender equality
Development program. Two-year career development program at university level aimed at those recruited as assistant professors.	Mary (leader). Jemima (former leader). Felicia, Nicolas, Portia, (program participants). Claire, Constantia, Felicia, Lizzy, Marcus (former program participants), Minnie, Winona (mentors).	Assistant professors are trained to become future academic leaders. Leadership exercises related to gender equality and diversity. Members mainly caring for their own careers and upcoming promotions.	The program is designed to convey university-wide values related to the UEO, and to the need for organisational engagement and academic citizenship. Assumption that assistant professors would otherwise only focus on their individual research careers and view merit as constituted by research output only.	The program contains several activities related to gender equality. Gender equality framed as central to fair, transparent, well-functioning and enjoyable work environments and as a responsibility of all senior faculty members.
Faculty- and department-level spaces. Several spaces in which tenure track-related matters happen or decisions affecting the careers of tenure track academics are made.	(All participants except Elise).	Allocation of research resources, appointments to leadership assignments, recommending (or not) promotion candidates, redistributing (or not) teaching loads, identifying external assessors, etc. Members act in the interest of their department, unit or group.	Staffing and merit are about pragmatic optimisation of local research and teaching activities. Department heads and professors know best how to balance UEO regulations against local needs.	Gender equality is a university-wide concern that is sometimes problematic in relation to department-level staffing needs. UEO processes are to be followed, but gender equality concerns are usually absent in decision-making situations.

between him and his professorship. What I hope to hear then is informed reflective-ness, I want to be reassured that he, or she, will make the best use possible of our staff and our resources at the university. We are not here to flunk people, we are here to uphold quality. (Stephen, Provost)

Several informants pointed out that members of the university appointments board despite the ethos of equality still tended to favour promotion candidates displaying certain masculine characteristics in order to appear as potential academic leaders or indeed as experts in their subject area. These desired characteristics often involved being a charismatic and dominant personality, promoting impressive performance records, active management styles, and futures full of projects and achievements (Lund & Tienari, 2019). Such stereotypical masculine notions of academic leadership did not only require assimilation by women but also by men, as manifested in this account of a promotion interview in the appointments board:

> The interview went quite well, actually. They had lots of questions and I had good answers. Afterwards, my Vice-Dean called me and said that the board was not impressed. I didn't appear as 'professorial' as they had expected. My reflection on that? Well, the next time I will put on my best suit, I will act with confidence and force, I will dominate the room and drive the discussion. The external experts had recommended promotion, but I was turned down in the end because I acted like a junior. (George, Associate Professor, Head of Dept)

The tenure track team

This is an informal group without decision-making responsibilities, again led by the university provost but unlike the appointments board only composed by the tenure track responsible professors from the Faculties. In this group, practical matters and dilemmas relating to the tenure track system and long-term competence development are discussed. Gender equality concerns are always present in the room as one of the main perspectives involved in processing recruitment, promotions, and staff planning matters — but also in discussions on all sorts of dilemmas involved in the daily handling of tenure track-related matters. Through the team, the provost wanted to assist the Faculties in their handling of the tenure track system, ensure that all Faculties worked in the same way, improve the quality of applications brought to the appointments board, and identify issues to be addressed in future revisions of the UEO. It appeared that this was a closed, non-public space where otherwise un-articulated concerns on how meritocracy and gender equality were negotiated in other spaces could be voiced:

> The team is not a formal body, so we can discuss more openly. One current discussion, that would be impossible to have elsewhere, is if we tend to put too much trust in the hands of our heads of departments. Most information about recruitment needs, promotion candidates and so forth appear through them. They know their subject areas and their units best, and we expect them to work according to the rules and the spirit of the UEO, to act against discrimination, to treat everyone alike. But that does not always happen, and I encourage [my team members] to seek their own information and have direct contact with those interested in promotion, for example. I can understand that a head of department may have his favourite candidate for a position,

but he must still be able to act without bias. We all have our formal roles to play. (Stephen, Provost)

A recurring negotiation in the tenure track team was the tension between gender equality reforms based on a structural and strategic perspective and merits as located in individuals (Gill, 2017). Several informants noted that whilst it was widely accepted to discuss inequalities and discrimination on a general level, it was almost impossible to apply these insights in handling individual matters outside the tenure track team:

> In every individual case there is always an excuse for treating it as not a matter of gender equality, but rather of individual performance. Gender equality is easily brought up in central meetings as a general issue that everyone agrees about, but change can only be built individual case by individual case. No one dares to say that of course out in the open. (Sharon, Associate Professor, team member)

Faculty staffing boards

Each Faculty has a staffing board, chaired by the tenure track responsible professor/vice-dean. Staffing boards prepare applications for new positions to the appointments board and handle the recruitment processes once the positions have been approved. They also handle all recruitment and promotion matters for non-tenure track positions. The boards consist of heads of department, teacher representatives, and student representatives, which implies that they tend to be dominated by departmental concerns on teaching profiles, preferred research directions, and economic performance criteria.

Informants describe the negotiations in these spaces as revolving in the intersection between the local needs put forward by heads of department and the university-wide principles established in the UEO. It was, e.g. not unusual that departments pushed to have their own favourites recruited or tried to affect decisions on who got promoted or not — despite that such processes needed to follow systematic procedures that also involved gender-related concerns — and it often happened that measurable research performance became the sole meritocratic criterion in the end:

> It was an associate professor position, we had three candidates left. They gave short lectures and were interviewed by the entire board. It was a woman in her 40's, very experienced, almost on full professor level. It was another woman in her 40's, also an experienced senior lecturer at another university. And then this guy, slightly below 40, only one year of teaching experience, but with a publication list as long as your arm. And he gave a terrible lecture, terrible answers in the interview, almost ignored questions on academic leadership and gender. But the head of department was really impressed with all these papers and citations. One of the old guys in the board, he's allergic to gender issues, agreed. So the guy came out at second place in the end. (Lara, Professor, member of staffing board)

In some of the staffing boards, gender equality concerns were framed as an unwelcome and un-meritocratic distortion of an otherwise well-functioning system (Wieners & Weber, 2020). Some of the vice-deans noted that a way to 'cut through' such de-mobilisation efforts was to give holders of certain positions the mandate and expectation to insert a gender equality perspective in spaces where it would otherwise be absent — even though it may be met by open resistance at times:

…and there are no real problems for me bringing up gender equality issues nowadays in the staffing board. I have been given a formalised role in the tenure track system that is most helpful, and I am now able to ask questions that I did not ask before. I even think this is a systemic change, it was not that easy before, but now my board colleagues don't moan about it as much as they used to. (Howard, Professor, Vice-Dean)

An additional aspect is an absence and void — i.e. that expected decisions never materialised in the spaces (Husu, 2021). In our material, we have several examples of how positions were never filled despite eligible candidates or how managers at department level denied responsibility for their junior and female colleagues' lack of managerial and administrative experience when finding them unfit for promotions. As noted by one of the vice-deans:

We need more female promotion candidates, and one way to get there – at least that's my own experience – is to make sure that all junior faculty build up managerial and administrative merits. I try hard in our Faculty staffing board to make department heads understand that. It is crucial that the departments take care of their staff, plan for their careers, make sure positions rotate between people. We can't have a lot of requirements if we don't give them the opportunity to meet these requirements! (Karen, Professor, Vice-Dean)

Other Faculty-level managers than the Vice-Deans tended to view central university criteria as somewhat problematic in relation to their own local performance criteria. For them, it was natural to promote in the staffing board behaviours that related to core performance criteria at the department level. A head of the department voiced frustration over the ambition in the UEO to recruit tenure track faculty with international experience and knowledge on academic leadership, gender, and diversity when all he needed was someone to do all the undergraduate teaching:

I'm quite mad at [the Provost] right now. He refused to let us hire an adjunct teacher and instead suggested we should go for an assistant professorship. Instead of getting 100% teaching I would get 30% and then I would have to raise funds for 70% research. I really don't see why central boards should be interfering in my staffing decisions. They have other priorities and they don't understand our needs here at the department. My job is about money and productivity, nothing else. (George, Associate Professor, Head of Dept)

The development program

This is a 2-year career development program at university level aimed at those recruited as assistant professors. The program includes knowledge development and leadership exercises related to gender equality and diversity. It is also a forum to provide early-career scholars with professional networks, mentors, and allies — several leading professors and managers at the university are invited to program sessions as guest lecturers and advisors. Gender-related negotiations in this space tend to revolve around leadership and gender concerns not only in relation to 'hard' performance demands, such as citations and grants, but also to work/life balance issues. Many assistant professors experience that in their local milieux, they are often only expected to focus on publications and grant acquisition, rather

than engaging with workplace cultures, developing their own leadership capacity, or leading balanced lives caring for spouses and small children.

> I did not like that the [development] program was mandatory, to be honest. Just a lot of hours spent away from my research projects. But the sessions are interesting, I have got to know a lot of other assistant professors across [the university] and I understand now that my own unit does not work well. We had a guest lecturer [in the program] speaking about how women are often silenced in academic macho cultures, that was spot on! Now I try to encourage young women around me to speak up in unit meetings. Before, I did not care. [Nicolas, Assistant Professor]

Some informants remarked that the development program had historically implied the formation of professional networks amongst early-career scholars, not least where women were concerned. For example, the university-wide female faculty network had originally been established by women who met each other during the first year of the development program. At the same time, there were experiences of such networks being seen as separatist and somewhat provocative by male professors (Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

> Women are more fragmented than men. Men stick together. In my department management team, there are male groupings and they have their network. We women do not have that kind of network. There are no natural arenas where we can gain power and confidence. […] I led some sessions in [the development program] and they suggested a network for female researchers at [my Faculty]. But what would happen then? The men would perhaps be suspicious and wonder why. But I would like to do it as I feel lonely as a researcher and want to secure collaborations. (Minnie, Associate Professor)

Faculty- and department-level spaces

 Aside from these organisational spaces that are all directly linked to the tenure track, there are several spaces in which tenure track-related matters happen or decisions affecting the careers of tenure-track academics are made. Examples of such decisions are allocation of local research resources, appointments to leadership tasks at the department, issuing recommendations (or not) for promotion candidates, redistributing (or not) teaching loads, identifying external assessors in recruitment matters, and career-coaching junior scholars. Actors in these spaces tend to prioritise local functionality and effectiveness and to navigate between different interests at the department level (Lagesen & Suboticki, 2023). Examples of such are research grant priority teams on the Faculty level, department management teams, and centre or research group management teams.

As active professors in their home departments, Faculty vice-deans noticed that imposing university-central values in departments, centres, and research groups was not only difficult but also met by open resistance. What they enthusiastically embraced at a Faculty staffing board meeting could often be illegitimate or even unthinkable for them to promote in a department management team. In general, they approached their role to raise gender equality perspectives in local contexts with caution in relation to meritocracy:

> [My own department] is a bit special. It is like a researcher hotel, you cannot control independent professors. They are mostly interested in their thing, they just want to lead their research groups, they don't want to become deans. Deans like me cannot influence much anyway; this is a global matter of rankings and stuff. We can only be

the best research environment if interesting things happen on the shop floor. Gender equality is perhaps an aspect when trying to retain people, but not in attracting and recruiting them from outside. (Andrew, Professor, Vice-Dean)

Several informants pointed out many un-regulated exceptions that usually tended to preserve the leeway for department-level managers to staff their organisations outside the tenure track (Nielsen, 2021). New PhDs often stayed on as teaching assistants, post-doc periods were spent at another institution in the same region, and people were permanently employed at non-tenure-track positions such as Researcher or (until recently) promoted to associate professor from adjunct teaching positions. Some departments had even satisfied all competence needs without having opened a single new tenure track position for years:

> All our female senior faculty have a PhD from somewhere else. All male ones have a degree from this university. We only have male post docs right now, most of them with a PhD from here. There is of course always that occasional woman who is promoted and becomes some sort of token, but in general most women do not become senior researchers. They spend some tough post doc years at another university and start to apply for jobs in private industry. While the guys just tend to linger here in the corridors somehow, go for a short post doc and appear here again. The post doc period is critical. (Emma, Vice-Dean)

Department heads reportedly often actively intervened outside the staffing board meetings in order to be able to employ their favourite candidates, e.g. by questioning external assessments, emphasising merit areas in which their favourites performed well, and casting aside issues related to academic citizenship, gender, and diversity. As noted by Smolović Jones et al. (2021), such informal favouritism is often advocated by reference to fairness — i.e. that those who see themselves as treated unfairly in formal systems may still get what they deserve through informal support:

> We had an application from a man in my department and it was not well written in relation to the criteria. Several members still wanted it high up on the shortlist. 'This is a good guy, you know', they said. I protested. I know who he is and I know he is good, but we cannot set up criteria beforehand and then not apply them in our decisions. Otherwise, we should just reach out to people that we think are 'good' and ask them to submit applications. So they went on about letting him rewrite the application, and I somehow felt like a nasty woman when we finally turned him down. And then came a female applicant with a strong CV and a fantastic h-value, really 'good'. And then they 'well, she hasn't really done that on her own, there is such a strong group behind her, she is not that strong herself'. So suddenly she was excellent in relation to our criteria but came out bad in their assessment. (Asta, Associate Professor)

Our informants in the assistant professor category tended to be fully immersed in their daily activities in the workplace and rarely involved in meritocracy-constituting processes at the Faculty or university level (cf. Bristow et al., 2019). There are several accounts in our material of female assistant professors being in organisational spaces where only partial understandings of the regulations and ideologies of the career system were offered. Instead, they were subjected to a negotiated order where many of the rights and liberties that the career system granted individual academics were suppressed, while instrumental notions of academic careering materialising in performance evaluations and quantitative assessments were emphasised (Gill, 2017; Bristow et al., 2019).

Discussion

The study reported here departs from a perspective on HEIs as fragmented organisational settings, in which the strategic issues of meritocracy and gender equality are negotiated differently in various organisational spaces. These spaces are typically constituted through formal regulations and division of managerial responsibilities and become cultural contexts in which some things are considered appropriate, legitimate, and thinkable while others are not (Halford & Leonard, 2006; Modell, 2006). In the following, we will first identify a set of negotiated orders resulting from organisational fragmentation in the studied university and then discuss the implications of these negotiated orders for continued gender equality work and for meritocracy-constituting processes in general. In the terminology of Halford and Leonard (2006), these aspects represent the lines along which meanings and identities relating to gender equality and meritocracy are not unitary, fixed, and stable but rather renegotiated as individuals become situated in new temporal, spatial, and political contexts.

We identified four aspects of the negotiated order across the studied organisational spaces where meritocracy and gender equality are concerned: (1) individual vs. structural views, (2) varying adaptation of meritocratic strategies and regulation in different organisational spaces, (3) selective translation of meritocratic strategies and regulations between organisational spaces, and (4) sustaining gendered divides through tokenism and homosociality in some organisational spaces.

A first aspect of the negotiated order is that *gender equality reforms were discussed from a structural and strategic perspective, whilst merits were seen as located in individuals* — even merits that are clearly the result of collective achievements (Gill, 2017). The consequence was that it was widely accepted to discuss inequalities and discrimination on a systemic level while introducing such aspects in assessments of individual matters was seen as illegitimate and un-meritocratic. While earlier research has indeed suggested that inequalities may indeed be produced in individual assessments (cf., van den Brink & Benschop, 2014), it was not possible to question the handling of individual matters in the spaces studied.

A second negotiated order appeared to be the *silent acceptance of several notions of academic careering co-existing simultaneously* in the organisation. While the UEO and the tenure track system were widely promoted as the primary way to organise competence development in the university, alternative career paths and recruitment practices taking place 'outside' the tenure track were seen as equally legitimate and equally 'meritocratic' in some organisational spaces. This implied that coalitions of professors and managers at faculty and department level usually had the alternative of bypassing both the tenure track and gender equality reforms and reproducing existing practices, given that they networked, devised careful plans, and formulated lines of argumentation to make this happen.

In the spaces where the tenure track system was indeed seen as the primary way of organising strategic competence development, there was a *widespread acceptance of selective and distorted translations of the system* between organisational spaces. Many early-career scholars — especially women — were in their local milieu subjected to a negotiated order where many of the rights and liberties that the central career system granted individual academics were suppressed, while instrumental notions of academic careering materialising in performance evaluations and assessments were added and emphasised (Gill, 2017; Bristow et al., 2019). The few women academics who had been able to build relations with central university officials through, e.g. the development program, often remarked that they had discovered that

central university regulations and practices offered them more career support and a more multifaceted view of merits than their local managers had led them to believe.

A fourth theme in the negotiated order was the *cultural separation and hierarchization of female and male bodies in relation to merit* that emerged in some organisational spaces. In male-dominated spaces where powerful actors saw themselves as not overly bound by central regulations and at liberty to translate them to their liking (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024), it was natural to want candidates to display certain masculine appearances in order to appear as potential academic leaders or indeed as experts in their subject area — or to openly question the professionalism of all-female research groups. As noted also by Holgersson and Romani (2020), in some spaces, the minority of women are culturally expected to act as gender equality agents and voice dissent, while in others they are expected to just assimilate, blend in, and be loyal to the majority.

Organisational fragmentation — in the sense studied here — implies that all sorts of matters are handled in relation to actors' notions of negotiated orders in the organisational space rather than only in relation to organisation-wide norms and regulations. This implies not only that meritocracy and equality will mean different things in different organisational spaces but also that negotiations 'between' those two general strategic issues will unfold differently. Organisation-wide norms and regulations indeed matter — they tend to set general boundaries for what is legitimate in the various organisational spaces (Modell, 2006) — but they are clearly open to interpretation in terms of both applicability and emphasis. The main consequence of such fragmentation is that initiatives at renewing the meritocratic systems based on gender equality concerns tend to be demobilised (present but seen as illegitimate or irrelevant), selectively translated (in a way that creates alignment with local strategies and agendas but disalignment with others), or adapted to local circumstances in a way that reduces ideological visions into formal checklists and minimalist rule-abiding.

In combination with sustained traditions of tokenism, homosociality, and significant leeway for informal assessment and decision-making in parts of recruitment and promotion processes (Svedberg Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019; Yarrow, 2021), the tenure track system in this case tended towards reproducing the organisational inequalities that it was meant to alleviate. Several informants were members of several spaces at the same time, but only a few of them (most notably, the Provost) saw it as their duty and role to promote the same views and opinions across all spaces. Still, we find that meritocratic initiatives may, in several ways, alter the conditions for negotiations, insofar as new organisational spaces can be created where new norms recontextualising what is legitimate and thinkable may unfold (Halford & Leonard, 2006). Creating new organisational spaces — in this case, e.g. the tenure track team or the development program, but possibly also gender equality projects (Snickare & Wahl, 2024) — offers the possibility of negotiated orders developing under limited interference from established power relations in the organisation (cf., Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021). In such settings, issues relating to both meritocracy and gender equality can be negotiated in new ways — for example by emphasising dilemma processing as central in academic leadership rather than simplistic managerial solutions, or by articulating and visibilising hidden and informal processes in the organisation.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to study how meritocracy and gender equality are negotiated across organisational spaces in culturally fragmented HEI organisations. We found that negotiations unfolded differently in different spaces, producing and reproducing negotiated orders that sustained not only the primacy of individualist and masculinist meritocracy over systemic and equality-driven concerns but also the very fragmentation of the organisation. Our notions of fragmentation and negotiated orders thereby go beyond conceptualizations such as organisational decoupling (Nielsen, 2021), micro-politics (Yarrow, 2021), and gendered differences in compliance (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024) by suggesting that the overall situation is both stable and legitimate and that re-negotiations need to involve reconstructions of the various spaces and not only interventions into them.

What makes gender equality reform difficult — from the perspective of organisational fragmentation of meritocracy-constituting processes — is that it will always have to engage with the concept of 'meritocracy' — as an elusive but still non-negotiable institutional foundation for Academia (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014; Clarke et al., 2024). However, meritocracy is an argument that is not equally accessible for everyone when negotiating whilst also being constructed differently across organisational spaces. Those who are able to claim in their space that 'meritocracy' is already in place to a sufficient degree, that their professional experience and integrity guarantee meritocracy, strongly contribute to what Castilla and Benard (2010) refer to as the 'paradox of meritocracy', i.e. that when an organisation is explicitly deemed meritocratic, individuals in managerial positions tend to favour male employees over equally qualified female employees. Homogenising values on the university level — in this case, a rather centralistic tenure track system — will not easily affect negotiations in other spaces. Moreover, homogenisation may not challenge neither the institutionalised individualism inherent in the global academic system nor the tribalistic sub-cultures of various subject areas (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Silander et al., 2022). Gender equality proponents thus will have to engage with various interpretations and narratives of meritocracy at different places — by articulating what it is, what the problems are, and why it constantly needs to be attended to.

There are certain limitations to this study, which further inquiry may ameliorate, specifically concerning academics' ways of justifying actions, non-actions, and decisions in meritocratic processes in relation to gender equality. Our informants and their contexts were chosen only from one (Swedish) university, and it would be of interest to explore similar questions in other aspects of university management. The Swedish societal context — with its long-standing cultural emphasis on gender equality and requirements on HEI leadership to actively integrate this into all aspects of the operations (Silander et al., 2022; Snickare & Wahl, 2024) — is one that still enables gender equality to have a defined place in organisational negotiations, which calls for similar research in other societal contexts. In this sense, real-life participatory research in which negotiations could be studied in situ could possibly yield even more in-depth empirical insights. In addition, future inquiry should also take a closer look into new and emerging masculinities in Academia and how those may impact negotiations on meritocracy and gender equality.

Declarations

None of the authors have any financial or non-financial interests to declare, that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted here for publication.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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