

Covered by equality: The gender subtext of a work-life balance initiative in a big engineering firm in Greece

Abstract

Traditionally, engineering has been described as a gendered profession. Recently, engineering firms have made commitments to promote greater gender equality. Yet, they struggle to retain women, especially at more senior levels. Drawing on a recent empirical field study of employees in one big engineering firm in Greece (pseudonym Dimand Engineering), the effects of a work-life balance initiative are explored that was developed with the aim of creating a good professional organizational for women. The paper addresses the work-life balance program as a key organizational practice that was specifically designed to enhance the progression of talented women at senior levels. It is shown how the initiative that was designed to challenge the status quo was, in practice, translated into a mechanism that actually reinforced gender barriers.

Keywords

Work-life balance, gender, construction and engineering management

Introduction

That the liberal professions are bastions of conservatism has been long established by critical research (e.g. Larson, 1977; Witz, 1992). The gendered nature of the engineering profession is, hence, hardly surprising. Early critical contributions attest to the gendered nature of engineering firms in construction (Carter and Kirkup, 1990; McIlwee and Robinson, 1992; Evetts, 1993; Eisenberg, 1998; Greed, 2000; Watts, 2007a, 2007b). Nonetheless, the topic of gender in engineering firms remains an “under-researched area” (Clarke and Gribling, 2008; Brown and Phua, 2011). This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the outcomes of a change initiative whose espoused aim was to bring about greater gender equity in Dimand Engineering. The key focus of the study is on the effects of the work-life balance intervention, which was central to the change program, on women engineers.

The present study contributes to construction management studies in the following three ways. First, as we have noted above there is limited research on the gendering of engineering firms (e.g. Brown and Phua, 2011). This paper seeks to build on extant contributions by providing a field study of changing gender practices within a big engineering firm in the construction industry in Greece. While scholars such as Dainty et al. (2000), Lingard and Sublet (2002), Watts (2007a) and Styhre (2011) rightly diagnose and then analyze the gendering practices in engineering firms, their analysis needs to be extended by addressing why it is that changing these practices often does not succeed – despite serious commitment from top management and the utilization of significant organizational resources. The second contribution to construction management studies lies in the attempt to introduce theoretical perspectives from organization and gender theory to frame the analysis of the data (e.g. Acker, 2000; Martin, 2000; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007). The further broadening

of construction studies will be beneficial in opening up new, critical perspectives on the practice of construction management. Finally, the present research reflects on some of the barriers and potential catalysts for change in the construction industry, providing some points of departure for the possible practical transformation of the engineering profession. The paper aims to yield insights into how the mundane practices of organizations constitute and are constituted by gendered realities.

Gendered organizations, gendered professions and gendered practices

Engineering firms in the construction industry – and the engineers working within them – are constructed and constituted by various organizational practices germane to the engineering profession. For instance, Dryburgh (1999) explored the socialization processes that shape the professional identity of engineers: Being professional is largely linked to a series of ways of self-conduct rather than with issues of technical competence. In this sense, impression management becomes a critical skill to convince relevant others about one's performance (Goffman, 1959). Moreover, Styhre (2011) has accorded particular centrality to three aspects of the masculine ideology being at play in the construction industry and especially to the "virtue" of overworking as the competent professional should always be ready to "walk the extra mile" and spend a few extra hours at work when needed (Lingard et al., 2010). Similarly, the invocation of serving the client performs an important disciplinary role in project management firms (Fournier, 1999; Hodgson, 2002). The name of the "client" is used as a disciplinary mechanism (Fournier, 1999) and serves as a powerful representation that conveniently enforces the interests of the project management firms (Hodgson, 2002).

These organizational practices, however, are not gender neutral. Few, if any, studies of engineering and construction management have attempted to consider ways in

which modern engineering firms come to be gendered, the micro-practices through which gender relations in engineering firms are constructed or reproduced, and appear resistant to change, or, in particular, to equity initiatives (Kadefors, 1995; Miller, 2002; Dainty et al., 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006). Save for a few contributions, gender does not figure prominently in analyses of the organizational micro-practices of engineering firms, leading Dainty et al. (2004) and Styhre (2011) to conclude that gendering “is plainly an issue for further research”. In pursuit of their suggestion, this paper builds on insights of organization theorists who have analyzed the link between organizational practices and the gendering of organizations.

In general terms, organization theory and construction management have much in common and much to learn from each other. More specifically, research conducted within the field of organization theory has much to offer construction management in terms of how ostensibly neutral organization practices gender organizations. In a seminal article, Acker (1990) formulated the idea of the interrelationship between gendered practices and the gendered sub-structure of organizations, providing a framework that facilitated the analysis of the role of organizational culture in gendering organizational realities. Acker (1990; see also Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Martin, 2003; Poggio, 2006) argued that organizations construct symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce and occasionally oppose a gendered division of labor. Furthermore, she suggested that “Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived of as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood without an analysis of gender” (Acker, 1990, p. 146).

The corollary, according to Acker (1990), is a gendered sub-structure that socially constructs the definition and evaluation of what is usually neutrally termed “task”,

“job”, “performance” or “role”. Moreover, Mills (2002, p. 303) highlighted that studying organizational culture over time “provides valuable insights into the development, maintenance, and changing of discriminatory practices”. Similarly, as Bond (2000, p. 80) suggested, “a clear consensus has now emerged that culture, as it was and had been understood for a significant period of time, was the single most important factor in creating an environment in which women were undermined and/or blocked from assuming the highest levels of leadership”. Organizational practices that appear to be gender neutral, including performance reviews, promotion systems or the identification of job competencies can create cultures “in which only one way of being is valued or, indeed, even possible” (Coleman & Rippin, 2000, p. 574).

This insight has important implications for the management of organizations. The explicit commitment to change as expressed by management in strategic plans and policies may well be undermined by an organization’s culture and its everyday practices. Language plays an important role in this process. Research scholarship has stressed the relationship between discursive practices and gender (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007) arguing that language is not a neutral representation of reality. Rather, discursive practices shape our interpretations and sensemaking activities. For instance, to frame the notion of career around an enterprising self who realizes its potential through markets, innovation and the exploitation of opportunities is in sharp contrast to the notion of vocation embedded in the ethos of bureaucracy (dy Gay, 1994). They are two fundamentally different ways of discursively making sense of one’s identity at work (Sennett, 1998; Sennett, 2006). In other words, language constitutes meaning, and as such it frames and legitimizes the order of things. From a pragmatist perspective (Rorty, 1989), changing social reality means challenging established ways of interpreting the status quo and, consequently, offering alternative

ways of sensemaking. Hence, changing gender relations may necessitate a change in the discursive practices of an organization.

Changing gender inequality

The sections above have established that organizations, including engineering firms in the construction industry, are constituted through practices that may gender organizational reality. In other words, the status quo of male domination is maintained and perpetuated through ostensibly ordinary, everyday organizational practices. Most scholarly contributions conclude by highlighting that organizations are gendered through seemingly neutral practices such as promotion procedures, performance reviews and others (Martin, 2000). Radicalizing the discourse on gender, Wilson (1999, p. 537) argued that “unless men and women wake up to the fact that we live in a more unequal society today than we did 25 years ago and wish to see change, little is likely to change. All the egalitarian slogans, views and beliefs will keep pushing women further back or maintaining the status quo”. The question raised by Wilson’s analysis is, how can change be accomplished?

One attempt to do so can be found in the work of Meyerson and Kolb (2000): their interest focuses on how gender inequalities can be overcome in practice in order to make organizations more effective and more equitable. Building on the work of Acker (1990, 2000), Martin (2000) and others, they understand gender “as a complex social process enacted across a range of organizational phenomena, from formal policies and practices to informal patterns of everyday interaction, which appear to be gender neutral on their face, yet reflect and maintain a gendered order in which men and various forms of masculinity predominate” (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 590).

Consequently, it is at the level of organizational micro-practices where change strategies need to be focused: “Strategies to promote gender equity in organizations

need to focus on assumptions in the organizational culture that underpin work practices and behaviors (Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999, p. 194).

The concrete organizational practices that gender organizational reality – such as informal work practices, symbols and images, everyday social interactions, people's socialization and expression of their gendered identities – become, once identified, targets for change and offer potential for improved effectiveness (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). By asking questions such as: “How does the organization do its work?” and “What is valued? What is not?” the approach suggested by Meyerson and Kolb (2000) is able to analyze the effectiveness of the organization while concomitantly highlighting its gendered nature. The possibilities for change interventions inspired by their approach promise – at least theoretically – to create a more equitable workplace and, simultaneously, add to the bottom line.

Based on these theoretical reflections, the work-life balance program initiated by Dimand Engineering was studied empirically in order to explore how it was enacted in practice, how it shaped the “sub-structure” (Acker, 1990) of Dimand Engineering, and how it affected organizational gender dynamics. The work-life balance program under study was designed to enhance the retention and progression of talented women. The aim of the study was to understand how the work-life balance initiative was organized in practice, and how organizational practice that was designed to challenge the status quo was translated into reinforcing gender barriers.

Methodology and data collection

Dimand Engineering was sufficiently reflexive to understand that its organization was gendered. At a basic level, the gap between the number of male and female employees became wider as one travelled higher up the organizational hierarchy. This was a

point that was frequently made by one of the partners within this firm. That it became framed within Dimand Engineering as a problem owed to the blending of pragmatism with a commitment to equity: the two partners were firm believers in the notion that improved gender equality was good to business. These factors led Dimand Engineering to embark on a change initiative designed to retain talented women and aid their progression within the firm.

The initiative was launched in 2006 and led by the partners who shared a belief that the initiative was in the interests of the business and ethically the “right” thing to do. The initiative was supported by the human resources team who worked on the implementation of the program. The gender initiative was based on the development of a work-life balance program which promoted a number of alternative work schedules and flexible work practices designed to assist women to achieve a more satisfactory work-life balance and as a corollary reduce the turnover of talented women and increase the number of senior women. Such practices included flexitime, compressed work weeks, part-time work and job-sharing.

The methodological approach follows the tradition of qualitative fieldwork. Data gathering techniques that sought to represent “empirical reality as experienced by organizational participants themselves” were used in the field study research (Stablein, 2006, p. 515). This included MP3-recorded, semi-structured interviews conducted with thirteen managers (both male and female, between 35 and 52 years old, all holding civil engineering university degrees) and directors (both male and female, between 44 and 55 years all, all holding civil engineering university degrees) from five different groups of Dimand Engineering. Four interviews were also conducted with the two male partners and senior staff from Human Resources who worked closely with managers. The interviews mainly took place four years after the

introduction of the work-life balance initiative. The interviewees offered valuable insights into how they and others in the organization perceived the initiative. In this respect, the study did not intend to describe the outcomes of the work-life balance program, but rather to understand how Dimand's employees made sense of it and how, in turn, their enactments and interpretations gendered organizational reality. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted at the national headquarters of Dimand Engineering. Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed. Besides personal questions pertaining to work position, career goals, working hours and formal job descriptions, a semi-structured interview format was used including some of the following questions: "What work really matters? What seems to be valued most?", "What skills are most needed? What is recognized as competence?", "What does the organization reward? How do you get promoted?" "How do you manage your staff and your relationship with senior partners and with clients?"

Data analysis

In representing the data, direct quotes from participants' perceptions and experiences were used to evidence, highlight or illustrate a particular finding, and also to provide examples of the gendering practices within their organization (Ely, 1995). Since the data were mostly discursive, principles from discourse analysis were used to guide the second-order interpretations (Martin, 1990). The premise of discourse analysis is that the social world is constructed through the medium of language. In this sense, discourse analysis investigates the power effects of language, trying to deconstruct the naturalizations of social relations in discourse. While the present study drew upon the focus of discourse analysis on the relation between language, social organization and

change (Laine & Vaara, 2007) it does not claim to have used its the sophisticated analytical tools.

Through a continuous reading and re-reading of the data, a strong ambiguity and contradiction in comments related to gender started to emerge. Frequently, the interviewees seemed unable to articulate coherently their impression of the work-life balance program and its impacts. Ultimately, this incoherence was considered to be one of the particularly interesting features of the data. The gaps, the omissions and the inconsistencies reflected a deep level of uneasiness and discomfort that was only poorly masked by attempts to rationalize the status quo (Martin, 1990).

Findings

Work-life balance in practice

In this section, the actual practices that enacted the program will be examined with the aim to explain how work-life balance was translated into action. The following quote, taken from an interview with a male manager, pinpoints three key issues that undermined the work-life balance program's objectives.

“I don't know, work-life balance for me, I suppose, means do I have to come and sit at my desk or can I work from somewhere else, and also do I have to work from 9 to 5 or can I work midday to 8 or 6 to 3, or whatever? The answer to that is, certainly from a time point of view as I said before, you know, most people would say you've got a job to do and you get it done, you get it done whether you do that during standard working hours or other working hours, it doesn't really matter. Obviously you carry out most of your – most of our work is done by directly talking and listening to clients. Also, you know, if someone always works from home then I'm sure it's not as convincing.” (Nikos, manager)

The three points made by Nikos go to the heart of the problematic underpinning the implementation of Dimand's work-life balance policy. First, work-life balance means that one can choose when to get a job done – but there is no questioning that it has to be done. Hence, work-life balance does not mean working less or stopping at 80%; it means having the freedom to get the job done when one has the time. The other two points of Niko's quote further qualify and, as it will be shown, ultimately subvert, the work-life balance policy. For Nikos, most of the work depended on direct communication with clients so most days one would have to work normal hours. Here, Nikos evoked the client as an abstract figure that may discipline those who strive for work-life balance. Finally, he added that if you were working from home it would not be “convincing”, meaning that no one would really know how much you did or how well you did it, or for that matter even whether you did any work at all. Nikos alluded to the politics of visibility, according to which “being seen around the office” is conflated with “doing valuable” work. These are the three important points that illustrate how the Dimand's employees of the study made sense of the work-life balance initiative: first, work-life balance was redefined; second, client needs provided a rationale for questioning and undermining the possibility of work-life balance; and third, based on the politics of visibility, work-life balance led to a questioning of individual work performance. In the remainder of the findings section, the ways in which these three issues subverted and undermined the work-life balance initiative will be analyzed in more detail.

Making sense of work-life balance

According to the official HR documentation in Dimand Engineering, work-life balance meant that employees could negotiate their hourly work arrangements. Thus, theoretically, staff should have been able to choose their own commitment levels.

However, it was found that employees made sense of the concept of work-life balance very differently. For most people, work-life balance was characterized as being able to negotiate when you work but not how many hours you work. One manager explains:

“I’m a big theatre fan. On Tuesday ... I wanted to go to a very rare theatrical performance from a very famous English group. This meant that I had to leave at four o’clock and go to the theatre. But then on another day I would work harder or longer or whatever. So that’s what it means to me really, that I can manage what I do”.

(Maria, manager)

For most of the study participants, work-life balance was not about choosing workload levels; rather, as the quote shows, they made sense of work-life balance by understanding it as choosing the time about when work gets done. In short, work-life balance meant that it did not matter whether you got your work done within or outside standard working hours. In this sense, work-life balance was related to adapting to the needs of the clients but not to the needs of one’s family. The espoused rhetoric of Dimand’s program was to accommodate the needs of one’s family, but the way people made sense of it actually privileged the needs of the clients. Their interpretation of the work-life balance initiative told most employees of the sample that a reduction in their formal work commitment meant that the workload would stay the same, but that they can manage the time in which it could be done.

Second, in practice, work-life balance did not seem to be available to all professional employees. There was an implicitly shared understanding that once they reached manager level an employee had more control over how they managed their workload.

As the following comment suggests, this was seen to aid work-life balance:

“When you’re pre-manager, and certainly in the early stages of manager you have a very heavy workload, always working for someone else, and you cannot really talk about work-life balance. After some years, you could think of work-life balance, but that’s where some people fall short. They get to senior, they think it’s all their time and they end up mismanaging their time and generally messing things up”. (Maria, manager)

Managing one’s time is represented as a key issue but again, as the quote shows, things can go awry if one does not know how to manage it. As the above interviewee pointed out, since junior employees were working for senior staff, the juniors’ work-life balance was framed by the needs and demands of more senior organizational members. Consequently, work-life balance was reframed: while the work-life balance policy envisioned fewer working hours, in practice work-life balance was understood as working outside of normal office hours. It did not mean working fewer hours – a course of action that was regarded as inherently problematic – but, according to the employees of the study, it was made sense of as meaning working full-time hours at one’s own convenience. This translation process undermined the espoused intention of both the policy makers and their policy.

Work-life balance and performance

Nikos’s quote, analyzed above, communicates that staff who decided to use the work-life balance policy were not regarded as “convincing”. The implication of Niko’s statement is that the lack of face-time and visibility in the office impacted negatively upon the careers of those staff availing themselves of the work-life balance program. The relationship between visibility and perceived performance was a common refrain, with it being articulated by all interviewees. This raises the following questions: how

was performance linked to work-life balance? And, to what extent did the definition of performance impact on work-life balance in practice? One male director noted:

“I certainly don’t think it’s an advantage [to be male]. I think it’s more about what you want to do and how driven you are, whether you want to succeed and what you want to do and, um, I think it’s more about your motivations as to whether you’ll succeed and [...] whether you can do the job, rather than [whether] you’re male or female [...]” (Kostas, director)

This quote represented the official line that career progress is open to everyone who is motivated and driven. Conceptualizations of “drive”, “motivation”, and “success” can, of course, be interpreted as being irredeemably gendered at Dimand. “Drive” was a signifier containing notions of ambition, risk-taking, and aggression, all stereotypical conceptions of masculinity. The corollary is that behavior regarded as valuable – and rewarded accordingly – was in a close elective affinity with gendered attributes. Dimand represented itself as a meritocracy, for which “drive” and “motivation” would lead to “success”, regardless of the gender of the driven.

Interestingly, Dimand’s prevailing representation of meritocracy was challenged by a senior HR manager, who posited:

“The primary message is meritocracy has to be behind everything. Now, regardless of your gender you ideally are promoted purely on performance and merit. We all know the real world doesn’t work that way, so how do you manage that?”

The senior HR manager openly alluded to the fact that despite its rhetorical claims Dimand was not, in fact, a meritocracy. Meritocracy founded in Dimand, seemed to involve the definition and evaluation of performance in deeply gendered terms. It is worth reflecting on the way in which this gendering took place. Following Goffman

(1959), performance is not only about getting things done but also about being seen to do the right thing. According to Goffman, when people engage in intangible work such as providing a service, colleagues and clients alike are forced to accept certain symbolic gestures and signs as indicators of the quality of the service and the seriousness of the provider. To manage the impression of performance might be more important than managing actual performance. At Dimand, impression management was closely related to visibility and presence: performance and the politics of visibility were inextricably linked. Rhetorically, the work-life balance program allowed people to work from home. Practically, this would have a negative impact on their careers because it compromised their visibility vis-à-vis directors and fellow managers. One organizational member characterized Dimand as a strong “be at the office” culture in which working from home might not be “convincing”:

“You know, if you’ve got two employees sitting there and they’re both looking for management positions and one says, ‘look I’m sorry, I’ve got to go, I’ve got to pick up my child from day care’ and the other one says, ‘I can keep talking all night if you need to solve this problem’, you’ve got a problem there. And it’s not that the other one’s not committed. The other one will say, ‘look I’m going to pick up my child from day care, I’ll give him some dinner, I’ll be back working from seven-thirty’. But it’s still that... so unfortunately that’s still the problem, where the other one will keep working in the office all night. They’ll get to about nine o’clock [and say] ‘Hey, how about we go down to the pub and have a pizza and a beer?’ Whereas the female’s already gone home. She’s still working from home ... but nobody sees that she’s working from home. You can send an email and that sort of indicates you are working from home. But you don’t get that bonding that the other two might be having”.

(Sophia, manager)

The quote illustrates how the pre-existing Dimand culture, equating being in the office with effective performance, placed barriers on the realization of the work-life balance program. Importantly, the visibility described in the quote was not linked to “actual” performance. As she suggested, it is more about being seen to work hard and long hours. Of course, the bonding that occurred as Dimand employees worked late into the night helped participants establish and cultivate a strong social network. That much of the bonding took place outside regular work hours gendered matters further. Often, the social intimacy of a drink in a pub after work allowed for sharing the pain, frustration and pleasure of working on projects. For many aspiring managers at Dimand such evenings became an integral part of performing their job. In turn, this helped create strong social capital that served as an invaluable resource for making a career within Dimand. For instance, one director explained how networks played a crucial role in the promotion process:

“I would hope that people got promoted or recognized regardless of the process that you had in place. That would be my hope, and I think sometimes people fall through the cracks, but then it would hopefully get rectified in the next six months or so. I have seen the odd person fall through the cracks and I’ve expressed that to people. ... I think regardless of the system you still need to have three or four advocates higher up so it doesn’t really matter what system they have in place. I guess the system is more about finding a way of doing it”. (Stam, director)

The ambiguity of the quote is worth analyzing in detail. First, the manager affirmed that promotions are based on merit and under normal circumstances “no one falls through the cracks”. In case it happens that the “odd person” falls through, the system has the capacity to rectify its mistake in the next promotion round. This is telling for two reasons: first, it highlights a belief in both the objectivity and neutrality of the

promotion system; and second, it is a refusal to see that the system obviously promotes more men than women to senior positions. In this light, it is maybe the “odd male” that falls through but rare for the “odd women” to come through.

There is another interesting twist in Stam’s explanation that a more critical reading of the quote may suggest. Stam mentioned that the merit-based promotion system does not make a difference – one still needs advocates that support one’s promotion. The system “is more about finding a way of doing it”. “Doing it” refers to promoting the people who have the support from a social network; in this respect, doing “it” means making sure that the “right” people get promoted. In Stam’s words, the promotion system is a mechanism for ensuring that people with a strong support network will succeed in the organization. It provides a technocratic veneer to reward social support, making sure that those who were successful fitted into the culture of the dominant networks and perpetuating the status quo of male domination.

Work-life balance and client service

Besides the question around work-life balance arrangements and performance, the notion of the “client” dismantled work-life balance in practice. Following the espoused rhetoric at Dimand, clients were accorded prime importance within the firm. The study reveals that the client was not only a construct that worked to discipline employees, it also gendered the organization. As one manager noted:

“I think there possibly could be a perception among some people that you’re not going to be able to manage the larger projects, which are the ones which you sort of have to be able to manage and juggle to prove that you’ve got the skills that management needs, and I think it can make it more difficult to even demonstrate that you can become a senior manager”. (Elpida, manager)

As the manager suggests, it is regarded as important to work on large client projects in order to be able to demonstrate the skills needed to be promoted to management level. The interviewee formulated her thoughts carefully, as she had obviously thought about the “perception” that work-life balance arrangements would create. The “perception” was that larger clients needed close attention, thus precluding members of staff who work less hours or are on a part-time working arrangement. Indeed, this was the dominant view expressed by the interviewees, as the example of a partner illustrates:

“We need our people to work five days a week. The client expects people to be around five days a week, plus long hours”. (Vassilis, partner)

Employees who opted into the work-life balance program had to bear the consequences of being excluded from working on large and prestigious projects. This had important implications for their careers within Dimand. The larger, more prestigious client projects were generally far more complex and allowed organizational members not only to acquire skills but, of equal importance, enabled them to demonstrate that they had them. Finally, large clients were more likely to commission follow-on projects that had a positive effect on the manager’s new business development activities. In this sense, there was the strong conviction that work-life balance programs would slow down (if not determine) one’s career because of one’s perceived inability to service important clients’ needs adequately, which would exclude one from working on large projects. This, in turn, would make it harder both to acquire valuable skills and to showcase one’s talent and capability. One manager summarized this conviction in the following words:

“But it’s also a truth, then, that – and it would never be said – but it’s the tone and the look, that you’re obviously not serious about your job at the moment, you’re just

working to keep the income coming in, you're not really that serious, we won't put you on our big important clients. And it's therefore really weighing up: do you want that road to senior management, or do you focus on having a family? And I don't see that the males need to do that. So there is that difference". (Chrysa, manager)

This manager told us that it was taboo to talk about it but being on a work-life balance program was tacitly seen as "not being serious"; one could not take on large projects and this was what ultimately counted in terms of building a career at Dimand. The "untold truth" was that the road to senior management required undivided commitment and the notion of the all-consuming client was an important disciplining tool. As stated above, the all-consuming client was not based on a survey of what actual clients needed or wanted, but rather it was an image of what the partners and senior managers at Dimand thought an archetypical client could – or perhaps should - be like. In short, the client as evoked within Dimand was not a representation of reality; rather, it was a discursive construction that created reality.

This is not to suggest that clients are merely imaginary creatures born out of the engineers' fantasy. Dimand's clients did exist, and no doubt some of them were very demanding. The importance of keeping the client happy was instilled in Dimand's staff. The point made here is that the meanings employees associated with notions of "the client" and "good client service" were socially constructed, negotiated, and confined through their interpretations. Hence the interpretation of the client and their needs was deeply political in that it mobilized bias in favor of the status quo. It therefore reinforced a conservative perspective on how work should be organized within Dimand. It did not, for instance, pose questions about how client relations could be handled differently, to enable the delivery of good client service by people on work-life balance programs. Consciously or otherwise, the image of the client was

evoked to re-build organizational walls that the work-life balance initiative was meant to have, if not torn down, at least partially dismantled.

In summary, the client discourse was omnipresent in Dimand and it played a major role in structuring work in the organization. The client discourse defined the needs of clients, which may or may not have corresponded with the views actually expressed by clients. In so doing it functioned as a disciplining mechanism for employees. From the vantage point of the discourse: work-life balance was irrevocably linked with not serving the client properly. Consequently, work-life balance came to be regarded as unprofessional and those who opted for work-life balance were implicitly critiqued. Managers at Dimand appear to internalize the client discourse, which discouraged them from taking up the opportunity to opt for work-life balance. The corollary was a subversion of the espoused objectives of the equity program.

Discussion

The question this paper has sought to answer is how the work-life balance program at Dimand Engineering was enacted in practice, and what its prime effects were. To summarize the findings of the study, the paper has demonstrated the manner in which Dimand's work-life balance program was enacted and ultimately undermined reproducing certain gender effects and inequalities. The paper identifies three practices that subverted the work-life balance program: (1) the redefinition of what it means to opt for work-life balance; (2) the link between performance and work-life balance; and (3) linking client needs to work-life balance. The work-life balance program that Dimand's management team had strategically designed was translated and appropriated throughout the organization. Opting for work-life balance ended up being widely perceived as reflecting a part-time commitment towards Dimand on the part of the employee. Being a member of the program was, therefore, synonymous

with not being regarded as “serious” about one’s career, Dimand or serving the needs of clients.

Our findings confirm Acker’s thesis (1990, p. 149) that “gender is implicated in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures”. As a policy, work-life balance offered a more balanced and customized use of an employee’s time. As a practice, it was the actual use of time, the total hours worked, the time available to deal with sometimes illusory client demands, and visibility that counted. The corollary was that work-life balance became reduced to an individual’s choice about work preferences. It was not developed in consideration of the gendered sub-structure of the organization, and the deeply embedded assumptions and practices that constituted everyday organizational reality. The two analytically separate elements of the work-life balance program – policy and practice – pulled in different directions. One undermined the other, rendering work-life balance a mechanism for obscuring gender barriers rather than tackling them. The objectives of work-life balance as policy (e.g. to allow individuals to choose their level of commitment) and the practice of opting for work-life balance (e.g. individuals opting to spend more time with their families rather than maximizing their time spent for Dimand) were inscribed in the initiative. They were, however, not in alignment with each other. The actual practice of work-life balance created a professional identity that was at odds with the pre-existing ideal of the high-performing, wholly committed Dimand engineer. This gap between policy and practice meant that the initiative lost sight of its goals. The work-life balance policy hit the barrier of the pre-existing realities of the organization, which privileged the discourse of the client and the associated need for visibility over work-life balance (see Coleman and Rippin, 2000).

Furthermore, from a practice perspective, the field study points out how dominant notions of performance undermined work-life balance. Performance is a strong mechanism that sustains and reproduces gender differences in the construction industry (Styhre, 2011). That performance is a socially constructed phenomenon is well established. It encompasses gender stereotypes and tacit assumptions about what constitutes “good” performance. It was argued that performance at Dimand was socially constructed in a way that gendered the organization. The deeply held assumptions about what constitutes “good” client service and how it is achieved through “good” performance rendered work-life balance a problematic issue. Work-life balance gendered the organization and divided the “committed” employees from the “not so committed”.

What insights does the present study provide in relation to changing gender equity in engineering firms in the construction industry? Language is a social practice that exercises and reinforces power relations. According to this perspective, organizational members constitute the relations of power through the language that they use. In the language of Dimand Engineering there was a close association between work-life balance and organizational problems. For instance, one manager casts work-life balance as a sign of limited commitment, which in turn was seen as a problem as it would have a negative impact on the career prospects of Dimand employees. On a more general level, language in use at Dimand was deeply gendered. The power of such language in creating a particular reality is central to understanding the unintended consequences of the work-life balance initiative.

Finally, the present research suggests a relationship between the language in use in an organization and the effectiveness of change initiatives. The dominant stories framed both thought and action in Dimand Engineering. They naturalized the gendered order

of things. It can be hypothesized that in order to change the gendered sub-structures of Dimand Engineering, the dominant stories need to change and be replaced by a different set of narratives. It can be suggested that change in the discursive practices of an organization is a necessary precondition for accomplishing positive change in gender relations (see Gherardi and Poggio, 2007). It reinforces Acker's (2000) observations about the problems faced in trying to achieve organizational change in gender relations and the role of power in organizing processes that perpetuate gender inequality.

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