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Sex/gender-blind training maintains and creates inequity

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Abstract

As training theory and practice may not sufficiently recognize the role and impact of sex and gender, this study aims to understand to what extent current corporate training practices fulfill expectations of gender equity and inclusion. This qualitative case study is based on three international training programs, in the Netherlands, the USA, and the UK, respectively, designed by a multinational corporation. The methods include an extensive training document analysis and semi-structured interviews with training participants, organizers, and trainers. The thematic and gender subtext analyses highlight how the discourse of sex/gender-blindness in training not only risks maintaining the status quo of under-representation of women but can also produce sex/gender inequity. The results indicate that training organizers and providers may not feel equipped to recognize and address the role of sex/gender. Future training research, theory, and practice should acknowledge and reflect on the impact of sex/gender, and sex/gender equity should be integrated into program design and delivery.

KEYWORDS
employee learning and development, employee training, gender equity, sex/gender-blind training

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sex and gender terminology is complex and controversial (Hyde et al., 2019), as female and male, as well as the feminine and masculine, are social, historical, and cultural products (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Although sex and gender have different meanings, they are intertwined and inseparable, as argued by Mavin and Grandy (2012, p. 219), who

"explicitly incorporate sex category into" their "understanding of doing gender because" they "believe it cannot be ignored in experiences of doing gender." An integrated view is advocated by Tate et al. (2014), suggesting that gender is a bundle of interrelated facets: birth-assigned category, current gender identity, gender roles and expectations (gender stereotypes), gender social presentation (gender expressions), and gender evaluations of one's gender in-groups and out-groups (gender bias). As such, this study follows the recommendations and uses the term sex/gender (Hyde et al., 2019; Stinson & Cameron, 2020), guided by two crucial observations: First, most of the research participants, especially male participants, interpreted "gender" as the sex category that a person was assigned at birth. Second, the literature review highlighted the fact that the vast majority of studies on gender and training/learning do not, in effect, research gender in all its complexity and fluidity but instead support a binary, sex category-based world view, dividing research samples into women and men. The use of sex/gender terminology is intended to stimulate greater understanding, awareness, and reflection on the differences and interconnectedness between sex and gender in training research and practice.

Sex/gender has material and structural implications in terms of inequality, especially for women (Acker, 2006), as their needs and experiences are systematically ignored in society and workplaces, and they are still paid less than men for the same work (Criado-Perez, 2019). Moreover, despite significant progress, women remain underrepresented at more senior company levels, with a key hurdle being the first step up to managerial responsibilities (Thomas et al., 2019). A survey of 13,000 organizations in 70 countries reported that nearly half of the organizations had fewer than 30% female entry-level managers (International Labour Organization, 2019). Only 8% of Fortune Global 500 companies have a female CEO, and only two of them are Black women (Hinchliffe, 2021). Thus, this research is particularly interested in the role of second-generation gender bias that is holding women back from progressing to more senior levels: "the powerful yet often invisible barriers to women's advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men" (Ely et al., 2011, p. 475).

As system of difference (Ely & Padavic, 2007), sex/gender is related to power through the control of resources, agendas, and behaviors (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014). Bourdieu (2018) stresses the importance of challenging common-sense ideas, as social logic produces the differences we encounter in the nature of things. In work environments, training programs can potentially reinforce a particular social logic or script (expected and accepted behaviors), which may impact the equity and inclusion of sex/gender. I define employee training as a systematic activity organized by a company for its employees, with the intent to learn and improve role performance (either individual or team) and support personal growth. Riddell et al. (2009) examined training environments in relation to resources and power, finding that a company's learning culture, impacted by the industry's knowledge intensity, can entrench existing inequalities. These learning cultures can support ongoing learning, with responsible and ambitious employees maximizing their learning and careers, or provide limited approaches, focusing on job skills for efficiency with minimal interest in employee growth and development.

An extensive literature review highlighted the fact that sex/gender is almost absent in training theory and models (Kroese, 2022). Similarly, management and organizational studies often neglect gender or are gendered without acknowledging it, considering sex and gender as variables, not as analytical frameworks (Knights & Tullberg, 2014; Paludi et al., 2014). In rare cases when training theory and models review and incorporate gender, they consider a person's binary sex category or whether trainees are women or men. Actual gender, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with identifying as a woman, man or non-binary, and the influence of situated gendered norms and expectations, are often ignored. Since the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements, I noticed that professional training bodies and literature increasingly discuss diversity and inclusion, focusing on representation in training materials, accessibility of technology, and unconscious bias. However, recognition of training environments in relation to resources and power is mostly absent. In my own professional experience, I find that the sex or gendered experiences and barriers of the training participants are not considered when discussing training with clients, performing training needs analyses, or designing/facilitating training programs. Similarly, as a female corporate executive, my experiences

of the barriers I faced and the differences between my situation and that of my male colleagues were not recognized in corporate training contexts.

In summary, sex/gender in relation to power, resources, and (in)equity has not received significant attention in training theory and models or professional literature. This is concerning, as relevant and inclusive learning and development are crucial for career development (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2014; Metz & Kulik, 2014; Streets & Major, 2014). In addition, the relationship between training, resources, and power requires a critical lens. Thus, in this study I ask: Could current training practices that are not sex/gender equitable be one of the barriers to the career progression of women? Does the $332 billion spent globally on corporate training in 2021 support or hamper sex/gender equity (Allied Marketing Research, 2021)? These questions led me to analyze the gender subtext of corporate training programs. The case study involves three international training programs, including a functional, leadership, and senior leadership program, designed and conducted by a multinational corporation that operates in over 100 countries. I analyzed the training documentation and conducted interviews after the programs. The programs have a global reach, and participants came from across the globe. In addition, virtual training enabled participation from a wide range of locations.

While gender subtext analyses were introduced many years ago (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998), this study is novel because of its focus on corporate employee training, which has been under-investigated to date. I posed the following research questions:

- How does sex/gender impact the experiences and outcomes of corporate training programs?
- To what extent do current training practices fulfill sex/gender equity and inclusion expectations?
- What could be improved in training research and practices to enhance sex/gender equity and inclusion?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Sex/gender and inequality

Most business environments are characterized by male dominance and hegemonic masculinity, which is culturally dominant versus other masculinities and women/femininities (Connell, 2006). These environments privilege individuality, rationality, competition, and heterosexuality: "It is ordinary behavior that is technically rational, performance oriented, highly instrumental, devoid of intimacy yet preoccupied with identity, and driven by rarely reflected upon corporate or bureaucratic goals that are presumed inviolable" (Knights & Tullberg, 2014, p. 503). The term hegemonic refers to a position of authority and leadership that is culturally based and visible, representing the pinnacle of what is highly valued (Connell, 2006). In these contexts, Gherardi and Poggio (2001) argue that organizations create/recreate social beliefs/rules about relationships between women and men. When comparing gender and gender identity, Butler (2006) refers to a play, noting that actors can perform the role, although slightly differently, but the script nonetheless restrains them. In this sense, when gender is seen as a performance, the context represents the setting for that performance. Comparatively, this can reflect the major differences in the performativity of masculinity versus femininity in a business environment, where femininity does not hold cultural power (Paechter, 2006).

Dzubinski et al. (2019, p. 239) describe the impact of this masculine environment on women as "a social and organizational world that has been created primarily by men with male lifestyle norms and male needs as the primary orienting factors." However, women also perform masculinities, and although men and masculinities are perceived as a logical combination, this relationship is not predetermined (Whitehead, 2014). Furthermore, not all women have negative experiences, and being the only woman can be viewed as an advantage in terms of visibility (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). Some women feel confident in, and embrace a masculine work culture (Whitehead, 2014). In this regard, the postfeminist discourse is interesting because it combines seemingly contradictory perspectives: feminism reconnected with femininity, as well as conservative and neoliberal values, such as individualism and choice; the

idea that women and men are essentially different and complementary; the return to more traditional gender roles as a matter of choice; and women no longer being victims of oppression (Lewis, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2019). As such, postfeminist discourse can be seen as hegemonic, severely limiting the maneuvering space of gender equality practitioners (Utoft, 2021).

2.2 | Sex/gender and employee training

An extensive literature review highlighted the fact that sex/gender is almost absent in training theory and models (Kroese, 2022). Griffiths (2006, p. 392) argued that: "as ever with philosophical and theoretical attempts to be neutral, it tends to the masculine." This argument could be particularly relevant for employee training for the following reasons.

Training is often positioned as an investment required to generate a return, such as increasing organization productivity, cost-effectiveness, and growth (Lapidus & Kazakov, 2017). This echoes the neoliberal view of employees as human capital and a focus on costs and returns (Tan, 2014). The focus on training as an investment stems from the 1940s shift in training responsibility from supervisors to training experts that resulted in it being viewed as a cost center, a concern for return on investment (ROI), and a way to improve job performance (Bell et al., 2017). Accordingly, Riddell et al.'s (2009) study finds that companies are more concerned with the firm's profitability than with individual employees' learning and development. In professional literature, training is positioned as a solution to a deficit, considering which competencies employees are required to have to successfully realize the company's goals and objectives, which competencies they currently have, and how training provides advanced knowledge, skills, and behaviors to close the gaps (Silberman & Biech, 2015). To calculate the potential for improving performance, one can consider the difference between the best- and average-performing employees (Bouloutian, 2009). This ROI perspective has the inherent risk of focusing training investments on male employees, as reflected in Keaveny and Inderrieden (1999) and Hoobler et al. (2014). Both studies find that women receive less organizationally supported training and education due to the stereotypical perception that women lack career ambition and motivation and are more likely to leave their jobs or work part-time.

Developments in the training literature further highlight the idea that learning interacts with events in the environment, both within an organization and society (Kolb & Kolb, 2016). An important research position in this regard is that learning should be approached as a process of participation in a sociocultural community of practice (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) famously introduced "legitimate peripheral participation" as the process of acquiring skills and knowledge by participating in a community of practitioners, thereby becoming a full participant in the community. They argue that learning is both situated in practice (situated learning) and integral to social practice. A well-known critique of Lave and Wenger's approach is its lack of attention to power dynamics that may help or hinder participation and learning (Roberts, 2006). This includes a lack of reflection on how power, access, and the legitimacy to participate/learn can be gendered (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). Bourdieu (2018) argues that human beings are simultaneously biological beings and social agents who exist in and through their relationships to social spaces or fields. From Bourdieu's perspective, training and learning environments represent a field with different compositions of economic, cultural, and social capital as well as power: "Social fields are spaces of competition in which there are inequities in access to the stakes (capitals) of that competition" (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p. 124). Consequently, the key concepts from the situated learning approach, such as communities, boundaries, and identities, each have gendered aspects. Thus, although not acknowledged in situated learning theory, "gender inhabits the very foundations of learning" (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 39), with women in hegemonic masculine communities in particular forced to stay on the periphery (Salminen- Karlsson, 2006).

Therefore, it is important to understand the individual sense-making of training and learning experiences and how learning and development are based on participation in a culture, such as a profession, company, or society (Lee-Ashcraft & Lockwood-Harris, 2014; Ottsen, 2019). As Kumra (2014, p. 280) noted, "becoming a professional is

much more than acquiring technical competence. It comprises a way of 'being.'" Instead of an individual endeavor, training can be regarded as a company's culturally organized activity. In a given firm, training is a part of enculturation, teaching employees about the way things are done, which not only applies to the training topic but also to how gender is done (Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2020), which incorporates the idea of a gendered script (Butler, 2006). In the words of Kolb and Kolb (2016, p. 11), "one becomes a member of a reference group of peers who share a professional mentality, and a common set of values and beliefs about how one should behave professionally." In a male-dominant and hegemonic masculine business environment, this could imply that corporate training practice is mainly applicable to male learners. While reflecting on teaching a course on organizational behavior to underemployed women, Gallos (2017, p. 655) similarly notes that:

> Our conceptions of truth, knowledge, learning, and individual development are androcentrically based. Our theories, beliefs, and educational practices have been shaped over time by a male-dominated culture... When women cannot match these learnings to their own lives or see them as relevant to their central needs or concerns, the women, not the facts, theories, and curriculums, have been termed deficient.

In conclusion, the absence of sex/gender in training theory and models is concerning. In an analysis of the literature on lifelong learning, Rogers (2006, p. 203) states that the absence of gender is not value-neutral but "silent violence" that reproduces traditional power structures. Accordingly, this research aims to critically explore the role of sex/gender in the practice of corporate training and development.

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Case study

The present exploratory case study investigates how and why sex/gender impacts employee training in a corporate environment with three units of analysis (Table 1).

The research took place in a large consumer goods company operating in more than 100 countries with over 150,000 employees that is committed to employee learning and development through a combination of formal, functional, and leadership training, and internships, mentoring, coaching, and development opportunities. The purposive and convenient selection of training programs (Plowright, 2013), with sampling not being the right case study terminology (Yin, 2018), reflected the need for information-rich training programs, exploring different constructs, and understanding their relationships (Dasgupta, 2015; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Additionally, a variety of training topics and different levels of training participants' seniority were important for providing the required data richness. The selection was convenience based, as the research depended on which training programs were planned and

TABLE 1 Defining the case

Case	The experiences of employees who work in the same company and attended the same corporate training program.
Unit of analysis	Three corporate training programs organized by the same company.
Data collection sources	- Interviews with individual training participants, who attended the selected training programs. - Interviews with the leaders of the selected training programs. - Training documentation analysis. - Interviews with trainers of corporate training programs. - Researcher field notes.

TABLE 2 Training programs included in the case

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3
Format	Face-to-face classroom	Fully virtual	Face-to-face and virtual
Training participants in the researched program	42 participants: 20 women, 22 men	19 participants: 16 women, three men	Nine participants: Five women, four men
Training participants interviewed	One woman, three men	Two women, one man	One woman, one man

could be included in the study. Based on the above, three training programs were selected, all conducted in English (Table 2). Each program runs for several years and in various locations, and one edition/location of each program was selected for this research.

The first was a leadership program provided to over 2300 mid-career and senior company leaders over 2 years to share the new leadership standards and equip leaders with the requirements to be successful in the 21st century, characterized by changing rules of agility, purpose, ambiguity, and speed of change. The analysis focused on the 2020 edition of the program in the Netherlands. The second program was functional, with a long history within the company, conducted to teach foundational skills to employees who recently started in or needed to expand their understanding of the function. The analysis focused on the 2020 edition of the program in North America. The third was a senior leadership program targeted at leaders worldwide who recently had or in the near future would move into a senior leadership position, provided to support leaders in this transition. The analysis focused on the edition of the program that started in 2019 and continued throughout 2020 in the UK and online. The nationality of the participants in the sessions was not investigated; however, a wide range of nationalities and expatriate experiences were shared in the interviews, reflecting the international character of the company workforce.

3.2 | Semi-structured interviews and training documentation

After the selected training programs, the company sent an email (that included a research information letter and consent form) to the training participants, inviting them to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted between February and November 2020 (face-to-face, Skype/Teams, or telephone interviews) and lasted 40–70 min. The interviews also involved each training program leader: the company employee who was part of the design team, whose role typically included developing a training design brief, needs analysis, and evaluation criteria; working with a provider to develop the program, and managing the program's implementation. Finally, four corporate trainers, who were not trainers in the selected programs, also agreed to participate in an interview. The decision was made not to include and inform the external training companies providing the training, for risk of influencing the way the training programs were conducted. Instead, a purposeful and convenient selection of other trainers was conducted, based on an invitation to a global network of corporate trainers, who develop similar training programs and aimed at similar clients to the three programs and client in my case study. The triangulation between the data derived from the interviews with the company training program leaders and the interviewed trainers, confirmed that approaches to corporate training, and particularly when considering the role of sex/gender are very consistent and independent of training provider.

The first part of the interviews focused on the interviewee and their experiences with the specific training program researched, within the context of the company. For example, participants were asked why they participated, if the program met their needs, and how they felt about implementing the training, while program leaders were asked why the program was organized, who was invited, and how the program was designed. In addition, the role of sex and gender before, during, and after the training was discussed. The trainer interviews focused on the role of sex and gender while designing and facilitating corporate training programs. In the second part of the interviews,

critical reflection was introduced, with the aim of challenging strong common-sense approaches to training. For example: "research finds that women and men can have different lived experiences. To what extent should training programs recognize and address this?" The semi-structured form for the interviews gave the participants the freedom to expand and direct the conversation while also ensuring the collection of as much important information as possible (Dasgupta, 2015; Yin, 2018). Finally, the company shared a wide variety of training documents, such as training program invitations, workshop slides, accompanying books, facilitator guides, time plans and schedules, pre-work and workshop presentation videos and articles, handouts, and homework instructions.

3.3 | Study limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the study scale was small. In addition, the results of this qualitative study, which focused on a company with a strong stated commitment to gender diversity and inclusion, may not be generalizable to other training programs and contexts (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, as participation was voluntary, the research participants may already have been engaged and interested in gender equity discussions more than other people. Future research should expand on the findings obtained in this study by exploring a wider range of contexts, programs, and training participants. Finally, this and previous studies included only the voices of women and men, reflecting a sex/gender binary perspective, not representing non-binary people (Hyde et al., 2019). Future research should expand on this by recognizing the fluidity of sex/gender identities and expressions and exploring the experiences and needs of non-binary and transgender people regarding training systems.

4 | DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 | Interviews

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions were shared with the participants for approval. I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts and coded the data in a two-step process by first adding semantic codes, followed by latent coding (Table 3). Both sets of codes followed a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. The coding process was conducted using Atlas.ti software.

The objective of the semantic codes was to capture the training participants/program leaders' experiences and perspectives regarding the specific training program they participated in/designed and those of trainers regarding the design and facilitation of corporate training programs.

The findings from the latent codes indicated the underlying assumptions and ideas. At this stage, the coding shifted to a more critical orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2018), involving more interrogative data analyses, centering on critical sociocultural paradigms, to understand how participation in the broader cultural, social, and institutional context shapes the interactions and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To determine whether current training approaches may produce gender inequity, I also conducted a gender subtext analysis to understand the often-concealed organizational practices that seem neutral and impersonal but produce gender differences and

TABLE 3 Coding process

Coding steps	Step 1	Step 2
Codes	Semantic codes	Latent codes
Derived	Deductive and inductive	Deductive and inductive
Themes	Constructs and relationships based on literature review	Gender subtext analysis
		Training as sociocultural activity

inequalities (Bendl, 2008; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Raaijmakers et al., 2018). This type of analysis explicitly focuses on the "underlying processes, assumptions, and meanings that account for specific representations of social practices" (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 791). Bendl's (2008, p. 51) gender subtext analysis review "explores the different forms of gender subtext that have been exposed in the last few years." Examples are "gender subtext of unconscious exclusion and neglect" (p. 52) and "gender subtext of biography" (p. 58). In a dialectic approach between my data and Bendl's forms of gender subtext, I have applied some of the forms that Bendl described to my data analysis and have added new forms based on my data. As the target company is strongly committed to gender equality in its formal policy, the gender subtext analysis may disrupt the belief that discrimination based on sex/gender no longer occurs (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998).

4.2 | Training documentation

I also conducted a thematic analysis of the training materials of the researched programs. After semantic coding, the documentation of the programs was further scrutinized in line with the interviews' latent coding to understand the underlying assumptions and ideas. This analysis focused on locating content that was positioned as neutral but, in fact, had gendered connotations based on my literature review and the gender subtext analysis. For example, a substantial amount of pre/homework for a training program, which constitutes additional work on top of already demanding jobs, could interfere with care responsibilities, most of which are still handled by women (UN, 2020). As a result, significant amounts of pre/homework could support a model of unencumbered male workers (Acker, 2006), as will be discussed in Section 5.2. I used Excel to conduct the training documentation analysis, given its various formats.

This analytic approach allowed me to contextualize the participants' shared experiences, and collecting a variety of data from several data sources provided a rich opportunity for triangulation to increase the reliability of the findings (Bachor, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989). Inspired by Hoyt and Kennedy's (2008) approach, I shared the data analyses with the training participants, asking for their perspectives to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations (Bachor, 2002). Four participants responded, ranging from no input to strong support, and one participant stressed the requirement of employees to conform to the company-dominant culture, signaling the importance of researching training as a sociocultural activity.

5 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building on Bendl's (2008), I analyzed seven gender subtext forms: (1) The exclusionary practice of dominant, hegemonic masculinities is ignored, (2) gendered perspectives and lived experiences are excluded, (3) the impact of power and privilege is neglected, (4) positioning of concepts as gender-neutral, (5) the mantra of choice, (6) positioning of women as the "other," and (7) the decoupling of femininity from women. I anonymized the quotes using pseudonyms, but the participants' identified sex/gender were included to locate gendered experiences. Quotes reflect the use of sex/gender terminology by the interviewees/original authors.

5.1 | Exclusionary practice of dominant, hegemonic masculinities is ignored

The participants described a work environment where hegemonic masculinities restricted behaviors and opportunities. As Suzy, a female trainer, noted: "I am always more aggressive, more competitive because I need to be like a man, because my peers are always all men. Therefore, to be equal, we need to have similar behaviors." Francois, a male training participant, agreed and added that these behaviors are displayed by women and men alike: "I have no issue with saying without any restraint that most men and women operating at levels above me are all very likely dominant and slightly aggressive." The expected performance for success in masculine business environments does

not encourage employees to be free to choose their gender identity and can "lock people into various forms of subjectivity" (Duckworth et al., 2016, p. 910). The barriers and challenges of the female interviewees highlight a major difference in the performativity of femininity versus masculinity. Sophia, a female training participant, shared: "Overall, I think there is this perception that being aggressive or assertive means success, and these traits are associated with male employees." Sophia added that these masculine expectations can negatively impact the well-being of women: "I think it would be very helpful for the mental health of females out there, to not be told or be pressured to follow that, to be put in this box (being aggressive and assertive)."

Unfortunately, the training programs did not recognize and address the exclusion resulting from dominant, hegemonic masculinities in the work environment: "In the training itself, people are very cooperative, but outside the training, this behavior is not always appreciated" (Francois, male training participant). Moreover, Edith, a female training participant reflected: "in training we try to be, if you like, as politically correct as possible. But the world is not politically correct, the world is not just."

The researched training programs focus on frameworks and tools, without acknowledging that the implementation of these occur in a gendered environment. As Walter, a male training participant shared: "It is mainly that we have a corporate framework, we want everyone to understand that, and we have a couple of tools, and we want everyone to understand and use the tools." Interestingly, two female training participants, but none of the male participants, shared how they valued having a coach after a training program to support training transfer. For example, Anne, a female training participant, shared "this (the researched program) is just having the theory, but then you go back to work. For me the link from a training to a more personalized coaching I find more valuable."

Sex/gender inequity can emerge when the exclusion of dominant masculinities in the work environment is not a topic for discussion. As such, these programs risk maintaining the status quo, accepting that organizations reflect, value, and privilege masculine practices, which impacts both women and men (Hearn, 2014; Knights & Pullen, 2019; Whitehead, 2014). While critically reflecting on current training practices in the second part of the interview, Sonus, a male training participant, concluded: "This is not inclusive, just blind/ignorant." Similarly, Edith, a female training participant, reflected: "The world is not just, and if we make it look ok, people will sugar-coat it." Sugar-coating may reflect the reluctance to see organizations as political instead of rational and gender-neutral, which may hamper a critical discussion of gender (in)equity (Amstutz et al., 2021). This invariably strengthens the dominance of hegemonic masculinities, weakening the position of femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities.

Gender inequity is strengthened when ignoring that, because of dominant hegemonic masculinities, some groups face structurally different and more significant barriers than others, implying that people who do not make it did not try or work hard enough. As an example, while acknowledging that gendered barriers exist, Effia, a male trainer, suggested that women may use gender as an excuse for a lack of skills or not following the recommended process:

> One of the ways she can deal with that (gender barriers) is to be highly skilled. Really work through the process. I think that's really important. Leave aside gender. I mean, people use things to mask their lack of capability.

When training does not reflect the barriers and needs of women, training will create inequity by enhancing men's development over women's. Importantly, the training programs also did not conduct training evaluations by sex/gender, resulting in a gender data gap (Criado-Perez, 2019) and an inability to determine whether the training met the development needs of women, men, and non-binary people, respectively.

5.2 | Gendered perspectives and lived experiences are excluded

In the interviews and program materials, the role of sex/gender, as well as diversity and inclusion, were not distinct topics, implying that sex/gender is a blind spot in learning and development (Stead, 2014). For example, William, a male trainer, when asked to reflect on how gender was addressed in training, shared: "Everything in terms of inclusion

etc. we don't cover. Let's be honest. The training has a different focus at the moment, a different purpose. It's more a one size fits all. We are trying as a trainer to treat a woman the same as a man. So, we try not to make any differences" (William, male trainer).

However, gender neutrality does not automatically mean gender equality (Criado-Perez, 2019). As Benschop and Doorewaard (1998, p. 800) note: "The identical treatment for all often impairs women. The organizational culture gives priority to the emphasis on *equal opportunities* rather than the recognition of the *unequal practices*" (emphasis in the original). This is evidenced by two female program leaders, who reflected that as working mothers, they would not have been able to participate. For example, Charlotte (female program leader) shared: "Being a working mum, knowing the content of (the program), and how intense it is, I would have never been able to commit to this program, never."

In addition, the previous section described some of the challenges that women face in a hegemonic dominant environment. Being able to share these experiences and realities during training is important for the development of women, as evidenced by women-only programs: they allow women to discuss the issues they face, without the risk of being seen as weak or incompetent (Ely et al., 2011). This experience was shared by Beth, one of the program owners, when reflecting on a women-only leadership course that the company offers, that was not part of this research:

> It just happens to be that the conversations and the unlocks and insights during the program, and the kind of vulnerability, and actually topics of discussion, tend to be different because you are in a cohort of all women.

The exclusion of gendered experiences and realities may be compared to micro-invalidations, one of the three racial micro-aggressions, representing communication and/or environments that "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Sue et al. (2007) argued that micro-aggressions can be equally powerful and detrimental to other social categories, such as gender and sexual orientation. Particularly, two micro-invalidation themes seem especially relevant for my study. The first is color blindness or the pretense that a white person does not see color or race. This aligns with Henk Jan (a male training participant), stating that he did not notice the sex of his colleagues: "I see women at work as my peers. I have never seen them as a different sex that I need to deal with differently. I just see everybody as equal." The second is the denial of individual racism, often seen in "I am not a racist. I have several Black friends" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276). Similarly, the male participants frequently mentioned being gender-blind because they grew up with working women and have many female colleagues. For example, Tom (a male training participant) said: "I grew up with a sister and a mum, so regarding my personal relationship with females, it is totally fine."

As my data confirms, an important revisited stance on gender subtext is intersectionality: gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other areas of difference are interconnected and reinforce their impact on equity and inclusion (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). This was confirmed by Julia, a female training participant, when she argued that we need to look beyond gender in training because:

> The expectations of you, as a woman, shift slightly depending on which race you are. For example, an Asian woman creates different expectations than white, Black, or Hispanic women. The woman's expectation gets filtered down differently.

Excluding the experiences and perspectives of women and marginalized men/masculinities (Hearn, 2014) during training and development, strengthens inequities, as their realities and the necessary skills and knowledge needed to be successful in an unequal environment, are not addressed. Only the realities and development needs of the group not facing these unequal environments are recognized, removing the opportunity to create allies amongst the dominant group to eliminate these structural barriers.

5.3 | The impact of power and privilege is neglected

Although training and development is approached as an individual and gender-neutral endeavor, this is a social action and construct involving power and privilege, access to resources, deciding the rules, impacting behaviors, and shaping development opportunities (Fox-Kirk, 2017; Stead, 2014). Transferring training is not done in a social vacuum, and numerous studies demonstrate that organizational cultures and practices are gendered (Acker, 1990; Fox-Kirk, 2017; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Ibarra et al., 2013; Ljungholm, 2016). As gender is socially constructed, it is very context-bound, and the context may enable or restrain the actions of women and men. Thus, not discussing power and privilege in development programs can be viewed as a way for the powerful or elites to maintain the status quo, sustaining the barriers to a more diverse workforce. As an example, William, a male trainer, shared that in his experience, women and men behave similarly in negotiation training, because being in sales is a choice and requires the "right type" of (dominant, masculine) person:

> It is a choice. Sometimes you will have a tough time and stiff opposition. Sometimes it gets a bit loud, which is part of it. So, you need to be the right type of person to do this.

This perspective does not question whether the expectation of having a "tough time" and being "loud" creates a barrier for women. Not surprising perhaps that women are underrepresented in sales in almost all industries, even though women often outperform men in sales, especially with changing requirements, such as influencing and collaboration (Zoltners et al., 2020).

Raaijmakers et al. (2018) argue that groups with different access to power and resources will create different learning truths. From this perspective, neglecting the impact of power and privilege and only seeing the learning truths of the powerful and privileged could produce gender inequity. In particular, when training programs impose expected behaviors: "This is the standard behavior and mindset that we expect, what we have included into performance feedback assessments, and how we assess leadership potential" (Beth, female program leader). As power does not always manifest, we must pay attention to hegemonic power processes that are concealed, hybrid, and often positioned as common-sense and rational (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). In this sense, one could argue that individual notions of learning and dominant masculine behaviors are forms of hegemonic power processes.

The concept of privilege is interesting in this regard as it helps explain common-sense processes and how the privileged may not see that the experiences they consider "neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody" are only available to themselves (McIntosh, 1988, p. 8). For example, men have the privilege of not thinking about being seen as both credible and masculine, while for women, femininity and credibility result in role incongruity and the double bind dilemma (Debebe, 2017). Accordingly, Walter, a male training participant, said: "They (names of female leaders) are so inspirational that they do not have to give up their femininity, person, or mother role." Part of the problem is that the dominant group is not taught to see privilege and as a result, sexism and racism are seen as individual acts of meanness, not as institutionalized processes. Not discussing power and privilege in training and development programs could allow the dominant, privileged group to ignore (and capitalize on) the structural barriers that exist for marginalized others.

5.4 | Positioning of concepts as gender-neutral

Concepts introduced within the training programs are positioned as gender-neutral, but can be gendered or have gendered implications in two ways. First, a society's culture creates an understanding of femininity and masculinity, as well as social role expectations (O'Neill et al., 2002). When certain skills and behaviors are seen as feminine (e.g., interpersonal skills, empathy, and people-orientation), the self-image and masculine norms of organizational behavior can prevent men from adopting these perceived feminine skills. As shared in Section 5.1, being aggressive or assertive means success in the company.

Second, concepts can be positioned as sex-/gender-neutral but have gendered connotations (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Ely & Padavic, 2007). For example, one training program highlighted autonomy as an important leadership trait, representing the opportunity to direct one's own life and work: "to be fully motivated, you must be able to control what you do, when you do it, and who you do it with" (Mindtools, n.d.). Within this trait, we must consider the relationship between two frequently mentioned trainee characteristics important for training outcomes: (1) self-efficacy, belief in one's ability to perform and be successful, and (2) locus of control, perceiving events as under one's control (internal) or controlled by others (external) (Gully & Chen, 2010). The former locus positively influences self-efficacy, one factor that positively impacts training transfer (Ford et al., 2018).

The training program positioned autonomy as neutral and unembodied, but gender can impact perceived control and self-efficacy (Gully & Chen, 2010). Specifically, women may experience a more external locus of control, as context, such as gender norms and expectations, restrict their actions. As an example, Sophia, a female training participant, shared the following experience when discussing challenges for women: "So, these are the challenges that I experience, as a female. How can I get my point across without being perceived as weak, and be respected? But at the same time not losing your own essence as a female." As such, being autonomous as a woman and: "Be able to control what you do, when you do it, and who you do it with" may be more difficult to achieve and, consequently, these idealized, autonomous employees discussed in the aforementioned training resemble Acker's (2006) concept of a disembodied worker and are more reflective of the realities of men than women. Thus, positioning for example, autonomy, which has gendered implications, as gender-neutral, can create gender inequity because these training programs prioritize male-oriented requirements for career progression. In the context of academia, Thun (2019, p. 176) argues that: "criteria of excellence are not objective, neutral, and universal, and they are more difficult to achieve for some academics than for others—usually women."

5.5 | The mantra of choice

Training programs are designed to be safe spaces "for everyone to share, learn from each other, experiment and grow" (Facilitator Guide). As Henk-Jan, a male participant explained: "Put me in a tough and difficult place, I will wear a mask and get through. However, when training does not require this, it has a much greater impact." Accordingly, the training programs claimed to provide the opportunity and environment for participants to reflect on the role and impact of sex/gender. However, my data confirms the difficulty of discussing gender-related issues for fear of being seen as weak or uncommitted (Stead, 2014). As Walter (male training participant) shared:

> If you are the only woman among men and you feel confident, you could say: "Hey guys, this is what you are saying, but this (gendered experience) is an experience you probably do not have." But you could also then conform to the group.

Based on this statement, the approach that it is one's choice to mention gendered challenges, ignores whether the dominant practices allow for these discussions, or the group composition makes it seem inappropriate. Julia, a female training participant, shared, for example, how, in general, she felt that asking questions was not appreciated in an environment dominated by men: "You ask a lot of those clarifying questions and they're almost like, they will never tell you, but you kind of get that feeling oh, they just want to move on, like you are kind of wasting time. And then I will start apologizing and I'm like I'm sorry I just want to clarify one more time because I don't want to move on without understanding. And then I almost get kind of like this patronizing tone and then that just makes me not want to ask as many questions." Similarly, Nicholson and Carroll (2013, p. 1243) studied power relations in leadership development, and found that:

Some participants may not feel they have the ability, voice, language, or power to resist the preferred identities or ways of doing identity work, even if they wanted to, owing to the disciplining effects of normalizing judgment, mutual surveillance, and confessionary activities.

The disciplining effects of normalizing judgment was echoed by Nikos, a male trainer, when asked why gendered experiences are not discussed in training: "Because social fear is the number one fear. It's very common in our society now, I'm afraid what other people will say about me." Equally, Sonus, a male training participant, concluded that training is "gender-blind," because during training (and other areas of work): "there is an unseen social pressure which makes us conform. Conform to whatever you see in the average." Sonus continued by suggesting that one cannot rely on the training participants to bring up gendered experiences and barriers, but that, instead, this needs to be built into the design, as participants currently merely are "reactors; whatever the trainers ask us to do, we do." This suggests a crucial role for program designers and trainers.

Based on the above, the mantra of choice creates gender inequity because it prevents gendered experiences and barriers from being discussed and, as a result, negatively impacts the development of women and non-hegemonic masculinities (the norm).

5.6 | Positioning women as "the other"

The gender subtext of positioning women as "the other" became apparent in the practice of women-only training programs. As Karen (female program leader) shared, the company considers the hierarchical level, function, and special talent pools, such as being a senior woman, when determining an employee's learning and development plan. While the intent of women-only programs is positive, as they recognize gendered barriers and support female leaders, the risk is that they position women as "the other," attaching them to the gender model and men to the job model (Bendl, 2008).

Thus, training programs that position women as such can create inequity, as experienced by Karen, a female program leader:

> We ran a program for general managers that focused on women, and some found it offensive. I think there is a general perception that "I am as good as anybody else. I do not want any special treatment."
> I think we may have gotten this one a bit wrong.

Women-only programs are also used as a reason for not paying attention to sex/gender in the programs researched evidenced, for example, by Karen, a female program leader: "When we were in all the design sessions, we didn't at all discuss gender as being a, I guess an angle we really needed to home in on. We do have a couple of programs, well one program mainly, that is targeted to senior women." This suggests that the subtext of excluding gendered perspectives and lived experiences in training programs, goes hand in hand with the subtext of positioning women as "the other".

Positioning female leaders as "the other" requiring separate programs will inevitably highlight a few women and may not sufficiently challenge the structures and cultures that need changing. In other words, this would "target only a few of the players and leave the game and its rules intact" (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014, p. 335). Similarly, in discussing experiences with the International Training Centre of the International Labor Organization, Cavazza (2002) concluded that:

> a Women in Development Program had been delivering effective women and gender courses. However, this happened somehow in isolation from the rest of the activities in the training department. For successful and effective mainstreaming, gender equality concerns must be incorporated in **each individual training action** across the board (89; emphasis in the original).

Interestingly, Sonus, a male training participant recommended a similar approach in order to overcome the mantra of choice (Section 5.6): "You can have an obligatory part in every training, talking about these gender imbalances and balances. Let the creators and designers also remember their responsibilities." The challenge is that the trainers in this research did not feel enabled and empowered to have these sessions, as, for example, shared by Effia, a male trainer: "I feel I am not qualified or trained to get into that identity discussion, that personal discussion."

Based on the above, the current approach of offering separate women-only programs, and a sex/gender-blind discourse for all other programs, is a concerning disconnect that may create inequity, as it may only reach a few women and position women as needing special treatment instead of addressing structural issues.

5.7 | Decoupling femininity from women

The literature on effective management, teamwork, and leadership styles and practices suggests a trend toward what is stereotypically called feminine orientation: transformative, communal, people-oriented, and facilitating, instead of directive ways of working (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Due Billing & Alvesson, 2014). The training programs incorporate this by including emotional intelligence, empathy, and concern for others and the environment as important employee characteristics. This is both termed de-masculinization (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2014) and re-masculinization: "practices and processes previously coded (and celebrated as) 'feminine' have been re-shaped and brought into the masculine domain" (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011, p. 474).

Although seemingly positive, this re-masculinization has two challenges. First, it does not necessarily address or challenge the dominance of masculine discourses or gender hierarchy. Companies attach a higher value to task-oriented skills than interpersonal skills and communal skills are less effective for obtaining senior position promotions (Eagly et al., 2014; Kairys, 2018). Despite the above-mentioned, stereotypical feminine orientation advocated in one of the researched training programs, Sophia, a female training participant in another program, shared how: "In the work environment I have been told that I am too nice. Which to me is offensive on so many levels. Simply because corporate life can be so tough. You need to toughen up in order to survive." In other words, the curriculum can be more feminine but only valued when performed by otherwise masculine men and women (Swan et al., 2009). Relentless competition, profit orientation, and challenging growth targets may allow organizations limited space to support more feminine orientations (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2014). Generally, a more feminine style is seen as more suitable in situations of poor company performance, while masculine styles are associated with successful companies (Ryan et al., 2010).

Second, the enhanced appreciation for the feminine is decoupled from women and their challenges/under-representation in business environments (Bendl, 2008). As Hearn (2014, p. 425) highlights: "masculinities may change …but the power of men less so." Specifically, adding femininity to a repertoire of identities and behaviors can appear manipulative (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013), as Francois, a male training participant, also suggests: "In a few leadership meetings, some people who usually did not display feminine behaviors, suddenly began to do so. It is actually a bit like theater." As such, femininity decoupled from women becomes an optional behavior and perspective (Bendl, 2008). From this perspective, training programs that decouple femininity from women produce inequity by reinforcing the gender hierarchy (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011).

5.8 | General discussion

The gender subtext analysis framework provided the tools to describe training processes, practices, and concepts that seem neutral, but support and maintain gendered realities and inequity. Overall, when training ignores the exclusion of dominant masculinities and masculine cultures or when challenging these practices is not viewed as the norm, the male and masculine dominance status quo (especially at the senior level) is maintained. Moreover, excluding

gendered perspectives and lived experiences may produce inequity, because it hampers the development of women and the feminine. The comparison between the exclusion of gendered experiences/realities and micro-invalidation also highlighted similarities with the realities of people of color being excluded, negated, or nullified (Sue et al., 2007). Accordingly, the analysis emphasizes the importance of acknowledging intersectionality, ensuring the inclusion of all women's gendered perspectives and experiences. When training ignores power and privilege, women and other marginalized sex/genders may never receive the resources, knowledge, and skills required for success after the training.

Additionally, gender inequity may occur when the training only considers the learning truths of the powerful and privileged. The privileged generally see their experiences as universally available, not recognizing the gendered barriers and double-bind challenges women face. Thus, if we ignore power and privilege, the privileged will never learn how their behaviors produce inequity, consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, neutral concepts may be gendered, having different implications for women and men. Not recognizing the gendered nature of concepts, such as leadership, may create inequity by setting expectations for success that do not consider the gendered realities and barriers that make it more difficult for women to succeed. As training programs are designed to be safe places for sharing, learning, and development, participants can choose to discuss gendered experiences and barriers, but the mantra of choice analysis demonstrated how a person sharing this information risks being perceived as weak or uncommitted. Thus, the mantra of choice may create inequity by preventing the inclusion of gendered experiences and barriers in training designs and facilitation.

Moreover, offering women-only programs could position women as "the other" and signal that women lack something that men, as natural leaders, have, and eliminate men's opportunity to understand and challenge their own masculinities. The data on decoupling femininity from women confirms a re- or de-masculinization, emphasizing stereotypically more feminine working styles (e.g., emotional intelligence and care for others). However, this decoupling may produce inequity by making feminine values and behaviors optional and by not denouncing dominant masculine behaviors and attitudes.

One of the key challenges in confronting equity issues in training is that designers, trainers, and facilitators must be observant, sensitive, knowledgeable, and capable of addressing the role of sex/gender and other categories of difference, such as race and class: "We need a gender-aware group of trainers teaching this language. They need to speak a language that is gender inclusive, not gender canceling" (Edith, female training participant). Currently, trainers may not feel enabled and empowered to be sex/gender-aware and inclusive. In my professional experience, I recognize this as an issue driven by a disconnected training approach. While stand-alone training programs focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), such as unconscious bias training, the programs analyzed in this study typically have a much larger investment and are sex/gender-blind.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This case study conducted in a multinational corporation examined the gender subtext of three international corporate training programs: functional, leadership, and senior leadership training. Semi-structured interviews with training participants, organizers, and trainers and an extensive training document analysis were conducted. The results suggest that the impact of sex/gender is insufficiently recognized and addressed in corporate training practice, reflecting a similar lack of attention to sex/gender in training theory. Failing to recognize the role of sex/gender in training risks reproducing traditional power structures (Rogers, 2006) and supporting the continued under-representation of women. Current sex/gender-blind training content, concepts, and approaches may create gender inequity and exclusion in distinct ways.

In this study, I apply a gender subtext to the field of corporate training, a practice that generated $332 billion globally in 2021, impacting the inclusion of employees at every career stage. This practice can be positioned as a company's culturally organized activity, communicating a way of being and reflecting the idea of a gendered script (Butler, 2006).

Future training research, theory, and practice should consider sex/gender and its intersectionality with other social categories of difference. Research should explore the impact of sex/gender on research outcomes beyond including the sex of research participants as a control variable, including measures of gender, such as the impact of gender stereotypes, bias, and barriers on research outcomes. The theory should recognize if and how propositions and relations may differ for women, men, and non-binary employees based on gendered lived experiences and barriers. Gender-neutral concepts presented in training research and theory might be gendered, such as a key variable for transfer: supervisor support (Ford et al., 2018) differs by sex/gender (Hoobler et al., 2014). This remains unexplored, which may contribute to the gender data gap (Criado-Perez, 2019) and reproduce gender inequity in training.

This study demonstrates that practitioners should recognize and address the role of sex/gender in training programs, including understanding the role of sex/gender when conducting needs and contextual analyses, integrating the role of sex/gender and equity in program design and delivery, and evaluating program equity and inclusion. Such training practices would support rather than hamper their customers in achieving their DEIB objectives. This study also highlights that to achieve this, training practitioners must be engaged, enabled, and empowered to recognize and address the impact of sex/gender.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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