

## Focus Interview:

Prof Dr Nathalie Amstutz: Fascinating and complex tri-national research project

# «Gender Cage» to investigate Persistence Gender Inequality



Prof Dr Nathalie Amstutz with Prof. Dr. Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger from Vienna.

DACH-projects are quite a special form of research projects in Europe. The name refers to the participating countries Germany (D), Austria (A) and Switzerland (CH). Achieving the support, funding, cooperation and colleagues from universities and national research foundations in three different countries is „a challenge“.

Dr Nathalie Amstutz, professor at the Institute of Human Resource Management, was understandably very happy when she learned last summer that two years of preparing the project proposal had paid off. The idea of this three country research is that the national research foundations pay for their respective research team which supports the co-operation between those countries enormously. For the next two years, Nathalie Amstutz and her colleague Hanna Voehringer will now be working together with the University of Economics in Vienna, the Marburg University in Germany and the Vlerinck Business School, Leuven on a topic called „Gender Cage“. Basically they want to find out what possible reasons there are for the persistence of gender inequality in organisations.

Following this focus on gender, the three research teams want to investigate into the role of the organisations. So what role do the dynamics of an institution concerning gender roles play? How does the respective industry affect that? How do organisations build up a gender culture? - To illustrate that you may imagine that a Marc Zuckerberg founds Facebook in a university environment for techies. The company grows and one day he needs to find new staff. He may then tend to use his old college network which is highly dominated by males. This may then lead to the installation of a gendered culture. “This is an exciting field to investigate,” says

Nathalie Amstutz. “Until now the research team has been busy with literature studies and theoretical work. Now we are planning to do interviews, group discussions and observations with several organisations. For this, we need to select and convince companies to work with us. The nature of those DACH projects requires the participation of companies who are doing business in all of the three countries which quite limits the co-operation opportunities.” Nathalie Amstutz says when finding the right companies, it will be great to have the opportunity to find out similarities and differences among the three local representations of the same company in all three countries. The project is open for companies from nearly all sectors including IT, manufacturing, services, consultancies and even non-profit organisations.

“The investigation with the companies will approach new aspects, e.g. the role of the institutionalizing processes and industry,” Nathalie Amstutz stresses. It will be driven by the question how the companies deal with the equality expectations. The focus here is on the structure and the project investigates the relationship of decision making, formal activities and informal practices. Companies need to make sure that they are members of the right networks. Those networks expect the organisation to be at the state of the art and innovative. So the research teams will look at those patterns and how the companies deal with them in order to become equality oriented organisations within a professional setting. So the project is also about possibilities of cultural change in organisations in within specific professional settings.”

The Swiss, the Austrian and the German research teams are all currently looking for suitable companies. As an incentive, companies will receive detailed feedback and reflec-

tions on their organisational dynamics when dealing with changes, as all those gender issues are linked with organisational or cultural change. Also the project will close with workshops in 2015 offered to the companies and discussions on ways of dealing with these patterns, reflect on these and support on what to consider when planning change processes. As an example of the quandary, Nathalie Amstutz explains that one of the potential partners in this project is interested because they had good results regarding gender equality (women in leadership positions) about 10 years ago. Now they observe a backlash. Where beforehand they recruited more women and had more acceptance of women in leadership roles, they now observe women have left the company and leadership positions and replacing them was difficult. “Reasons may be multiple, but they have the feeling that it has something to do with gender related questions and they want to understand why this happens,” Nathalie Amstutz reports. Touching new ground with research, especially in such a triple country co-operation settings is seldom. However, investigating something new and at the same time seeing that there are organisations which are explicitly interested in such complex questions, has resulted in a high motivation within the whole team. The 11 involved researchers want to feed their first findings already into a conference next year and open the public discussion on the issues. This will even happen well before the project is officially concluded in 2016. The research team also wants to invite more companies to participate in this project. (So if you are interested, please contact [Nathalie.amstutz@fhnw.ch](mailto:Nathalie.amstutz@fhnw.ch). and don't forget to have a look at the website [www.gendercage-revisited.eu](http://www.gendercage-revisited.eu)) ■

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