

What does “gender equality” mean? Social representations of gender equality in the workplace among French workers

Social
representations
of gender
equality

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Abstract

Purpose – This work deals with social representations of gender equality in the workplace. Little academic work deals with the way workers define gender equality. My research also deals with the implications of this definition in terms of policy implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – This work is based on a mixed-method approach. A quantitative study based on an online survey conducted in 2015 at a French company is mobilized to identify and measure the main representations of gender equality among the workers. Then, a qualitative study is used to explore these representations in depth and to examine how they influence the implementation of policy on gender equality.

Findings – This work shows that for French workers, equal pay and equal access to responsibilities are the most important dimensions of gender equality, while gender diversity and work-life balance seem less important. The representation of gender equality varies according to gender, professional field and managerial status. These variations help to understand the difficulty of implementing such policy.

Practical implications – Managerially, these results would strongly indicate that companies in France, but also in other developed countries, should consider carrying out awareness campaigns aimed at employees in order to promote a common culture and definition of gender equality. Indeed, the coexistence of various representations of gender equality partly explains the insufficient implementation—and thus the poor performance and general effectiveness of gender equality policies, both in theoretical and practical terms. Companies should also consider introducing awareness campaigns that specifically target men, who grant less importance to gender equality than women.

Originality/value – This study deals with social representations of gender equality in France, a subject which has been largely neglected or overlooked in existing fields of gender research. The international literature on gender equality shows that variations in representations of gender equality constitute a major subject for research and policies about gender, whatever the country. However, this topic still remains inadequately addressed. This research aims to strengthen such research literature dedicated to the issue of gender equality.

Keywords Gender, Sex and gender issues, Gender equality in the workplace, Social representations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Gender equality remains an issue in developed countries (Cech, 2016). France is no exception. A law passed in France in 2014 reinforced sanctions for companies that failed to respect their legal obligations. However, a report revealed that only 34% of companies subject to the legal obligation of negotiating a collective agreement on gender equality were covered by an agreement or action plan in July 2014 (CSEP, 2014). This figure can partly explain why gender inequalities remain so significant in France in terms of access to employment (Ministry of Women's Rights, 2017), the gender pay gap (IGAS, 2016), gender-based job segregation (Minni, 2015), or women's access to positions of responsibility (Allemant and Brullebaut, 2014; Dardour *et al.*, 2015).

In 1997, the European Union (EU) introduced a new concept: gender mainstreaming (Bendi and Schmidt, 2013; Scala and Paterson, 2017). Gender mainstreaming refers to the incorporation of a gender equality perspective into all stages of policy making (Letablier and Perrier, 2008). In France, as in other European countries, gender mainstreaming has proved



controversial and has given rise to a number of debates regarding its meaning compared to earlier proposed definitions of gender equality (Sénac-Slawinski, 2008).

The definition of gender equality is a key issue in developed countries, as Pettersson *et al.* (2017) describe. Indeed, legal texts not only in France but also at the EU level do not precisely define what gender equality means, especially in the workplace. Hence, gender equality is still a polysemous concept. For example, while many dimensions of the issue can be identified (gender diversity, equal pay, equal access to positions of responsibility), companies as well as employees can put more emphasis on some of these dimensions at the expense of others. This might lead to differences between companies in the implementation of gender equality policies (Scala and Paterson, 2017). Indeed, there is a gap between policies and concrete practices concerning gender equality, and the implementation of gender equality policies greatly depends on the goodwill of individuals, particularly that of the managers (Coron and Pigeyre, 2019; Woodhams and Lupton, 2006). Knowing that managers are rarely assessed on the basis of their implementation of the gender equality policy, it is likely that managers and employees make more of an effort to implement the measures concerning the dimensions that are considered important.

In this paper, I seek to identify the main definitions of gender equality in the workplace for the employees of a French company and investigate whether these definitions influence the implementation of the company's gender equality policy. Since this research aims to identify the representations of a complex notion within a population, it is based on the theoretical framework of social representation (Moscovici, 1961; Duveen, 1993; Abric, 2003). The concept of social representation was developed to illustrate the various opinions, behaviors, beliefs and information that an individual holds about an object or a phenomenon. Moreover, this concept offers an explanation as to why the same words do not mean the same things for everyone (Putnam, 1975) and is key to understanding practices and behaviors, as social representation affects individuals' actions and choices (Jodelet, 2003; Rosa *et al.*, 2011). Thus, this theoretical framework helps identify the main representations of gender equality as well as their influence on the implementation of policy and helps answer the research question: Which social representations of gender equality in the workplace can be identified among French workers, and do the representations influence the implementation of policy on gender equality?

The representations of gender equality are not often studied in academic papers, despite their theoretical and managerial implications. Indeed, the very definition of gender equality constitutes a key issue in most developed countries (Pettersson *et al.*, 2017). From a managerial perspective, taking into account potential variations in such representations can help the management understand the variations in the implementation of a gender equality policy within a company and thus the insufficient progress made toward achieving gender equality (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010), as well as to develop adequate communications strategies and training on gender equality.

To identify the main representations of gender equality as well as their influence on the implementation of the company's gender equality policy, this research is based on a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative study based on an online survey conducted in 2015 at a French company is mobilized to identify and measure the main representations of gender equality among the workers. Then, a qualitative study is used to explore these representations in depth and to examine how they influence the implementation of policy on gender equality.

I begin by outlining the main issues surrounding gender equality and the theoretical framework of social representations before presenting the company and the research design. The results are presented in three parts. First, the survey is used to quantify variations in representations of gender equality according to gender, professional field and managerial status; then, the qualitative study is used to define the meaning of these main representations

and study the relationship between representations of gender equality and the implementation of policy. The results show that for the workers of this company, equal pay and equal access to responsibilities are the most important dimensions of gender equality, while gender diversity and work-life balance seem less important. The representation of gender equality varies according to gender, professional field and managerial status. These representations help us understand the difficulty of implementing such a policy.

Literature review: gender equality and social representation

Gender equality in the workplace

Gender equality in the workplace is only one of the facets of gender equality advanced by [Ertan \(2016\)](#); the remaining areas include political representation, family rights, reproductive rights, the fight against sexual violence and equal employment. These dimensions are closely linked. For example, gender stereotypes about the division of domestic labor can explain some gender inequalities in the workplace, as women are expected to shoulder a more substantial part of childcare ([Cha, 2013](#); [Cech, 2016](#)). However, [Ertan \(2016\)](#) calls for disaggregation strategies, i.e. considering each dimension of gender equality separately, to study gender equality at a national level. Furthermore, these dimensions correspond to different levels of action. Whereas the first dimensions can be addressed at a national level by institutional policies ([Pedulla and Thébaud, 2015](#)), gender equality in the workplace must be addressed at the organizational level ([Snizek and Neil, 1992](#); [Ely and Padavic, 2007](#); [Van den Brink et al., 2010](#)). Indeed, studies have shown that numerous company policies and practices carry implications for gender inequalities ([Castilla, 2012](#); [Cha, 2013](#)). Finally, research has already shown that gender equality is a multidimensional concept, but few studies address the fact that one of the very characteristics of gender equality in the workplace is precisely its multidimensionality.

Concerning gender equality in the workplace specifically, it may be difficult to clearly outline the parameters of this notion, which exacerbates its multidimensionality. It now seems to be taken for granted, even for people not familiar with this issue, that gender equality in the workplace covers a whole range of fields:

- (1) Gender diversity (with occasional confusion between this and gender parity, as shown by [Fraisie, 2004](#), or [Bereni and Revillard, 2007](#)): women have less access to the labor market ([Gorman, 2005](#); [Mandel, 2013](#)), and occupational gender segregation remains important ([Cech, 2016](#)).
- (2) Equal access to responsibilities ([Gorman and Kmec, 2009](#)): women have less access to responsibilities, and there is a barrier to workplace progression, which is referred to as the “glass ceiling” ([Stainback et al., 2016](#); [Kalaitzi et al., 2017](#); [Naschberger and Finstad-Milion, 2017](#)).
- (3) Equal pay ([Jarman et al., 2012](#)): the gender pay gap remains an issue in most developed countries ([Khoreva, 2011](#)).

It might, however, be less obvious to include work-life balance on this list, even though this has been an important part of gender equality policies for a number of years ([Smithson and Stokoe, 2005](#); [Lewis, 2006](#); [Muzio and Tomlinson, 2012](#)). Indeed, work-life balance has severe implications for gender inequalities ([Kelly et al., 2010](#); [Cha, 2013](#); [Naschberger and Finstad-Milion, 2017](#); [Kalaitzi et al., 2017](#)).

The implementation of gender equality policies

The implementation of gender equality policies is sometimes difficult and depends largely on the goodwill of managers ([Woodhams and Lupton, 2006](#)). Indeed, many gender equality

measures require the involvement of individuals, particularly that of the managers (Woodhams and Lupton, 2006). For example, avoiding gender stereotypes when redacting a job offer (Laufer and Silvera, 2006), recruiting women by preference (Laufer, 2008), ensuring wage increases or that the variable parts of wages are not detrimental to women (Dickens, 1994; Lyons and Smith, 2007; Moore and Tailby, 2015), putting in place managerial coaching (Ye *et al.*, 2015) or identifying “high-potential” female talent (Ng and Sears, 2017) require both individual and managerial action. Research shows that the involvement of the actors and their very implementation of a policy are structured by the actors’ vision of gender equality, among other elements (Coron and Pigeyre, 2019). Perrier (2015) highlights that the implementation of gender equality policies is hampered by the feeling that this issue is not a priority.

As gender equality in the workplace covers several fields, it follows that individuals can grant more or less importance to each field (Blanchard *et al.*, 2013); such variations can play an important role, leading to an incomplete implementation of a gender equality policy. Indeed, workers, and more specifically managers, can choose to implement only certain measures of a company’s gender equality policy, based on the importance that they grant to each dimension and based on their representation of gender equality (Scala and Paterson, 2017). Hence, it is important for a company to identify the main social representations of gender equality among employees.

Social representations

The social representation framework was first elaborated by Moscovici (1961). Social representation refers to a mix of opinions, behaviors, beliefs and information about an object or a situation (Abric, 2003). Social representation can be both individual and collective, as social representation is determined by the history of the individual, her/his emotions (Methivier, 2012) and the sociological and ideological system in which the individual is embedded (Allansdottir *et al.*, 1993; Jodelet, 2003; Moscovici, 2003). This framework implies that concepts expressed in the same words do not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone (Putnam, 1975).

A social representation is based on a central core, which constitutes the most important dimension of an object for the individual (Abric, 2005). This central core usually varies among the population. Abric (2005) gives the example of the social representation of work. Work can be associated with various dimensions (constraints, social integration, social networking, bread-winning and personal development), and the importance of each dimension can differ according to the level of qualification of the individual or her/his employment status (Methivier, 2012).

Individuals need social representations to understand a reality and act on it (Jodelet, 2003). Hence, studying social representations is a key to investigating behaviors, actions and choices (Rosa *et al.*, 2011).

Social representations of gender and gender equality

Research has been published on the social representations of gender (Duveen, 1993; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004; Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; McDonald, 2013; Lewis, 2014; Brandth and Bjørkhaug, 2015). For example, Sieben *et al.* (2016) study the representation of gender roles, while Van den Brink *et al.* (2016) deal with the male norm of skills evaluation. Correll (2004) or Bobitt-Zeher (2011) recall that social representations of gender and gender schemas are foundational for the discrimination against women.

However, few studies have investigated workers’ social representations of gender equality. As mentioned in the first section, gender equality in the workplace encompasses several dimensions, specifically gender diversity, equal pay, equal access to responsibilities

and work-life balance. However, these dimensions can have different degrees of importance for workers. For example, some workers may consider gender diversity to be the most important dimension, while others may place more emphasis on equal pay, on equal access to responsibilities, or on work-life balance. Labelle *et al.* (2015) and Blanchard *et al.* (2013) highlight the focalization of the business establishment on women's representation on corporate boards. At the same time, Fraisse (2004) and Bereni and Revillard (2007) show that gender diversity tends to dominate public discussions about gender equality. Other studies are concerned with the perceptions and representations of equal pay and the gender pay gap (Khoreva, 2011; Saar, 2013). Charles and Bradley (2002) assume that horizontal segregation (referring to gender diversity) can be perceived as more acceptable than vertical segregation (referring to equal access to responsibilities). Hence, workers can have varying definitions of gender equality. Workers can also grant more or less importance to gender equality in general, according to their preferences, representations and environment (Moore, 1990; Bourguignon and Chiapello, 2005; Acker, 2006).

In particular, there may be variations according to gender. Indeed, the body of the academic literature dedicated to studies on gender shows that women tend to grant more importance to gender equality (Moore, 1990; Singer, 1992; Snizek and Neil, 1992; Acker, 2006; Johansson and Ringblom, 2017). Acker (2006) recalls that the visibility of inequality (the degree of awareness of inequalities) can vary in different organizations but also according to gender, with men being less aware of inequalities. Other studies show that gender can influence the perception of fairness (Essig and Soparnot, 2019; Nurse and Devonish, 2007; Simpson and Kaminski, 2007; Jepsen and Rodwell, 2012) and the gender pay gap (Khoreva, 2011). Snizek and Neil (1992) also suggest that a greater proportion of men than women adhere to gender stereotypes. Hence, the presence of women in a field is supposed to challenge gender stereotypes (Stainback *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the professional field could also affect the social representations of gender equality. However, existing studies do not offer precise insights into the variations specifically concerning the social representations of gender equality in the workplace.

However, this is a key issue, mainly because social representations influence an individual's behavior and actions (Jodelet, 2003; Rosa *et al.*, 2011). Thus, social representations of gender equality can influence the implementation of gender equality policies. Finally, existing research into social representations and gender equality leads us to think that different social representations of gender equality might coexist within a company and that this could affect the implementation of policy. This leads me to formulate the following research question: Which social representations of gender equality in the workplace can be identified among French workers, and do these representations influence the implementation of a gender equality policy?

This is an important question, both in theoretical and managerial terms. Theoretically, dealing with this matter can highlight the multidimensionality of gender equality and provide insights into the difficulty of formulating a precise definition of gender equality. From a managerial perspective, answering this question can help companies better understand the lack of implementation of gender equality policies and to define awareness campaigns to ensure that gender equality policies are well understood and in turn implemented by all employees.

Case study and research design

Case study

FrenchTechnic is a former French state-owned company that was privatized in the 1990s and that has been expanding internationally since the 1990s. In 2015, the company operated in 220 countries and territories. This study focuses on the company's operations in France, where

90,000 of its employees are based, 36% of whom are women. In France, the majority of workers still have civil service contracts (60% in 2014), even if they now work in the private sector.

FrenchTechnic faces several persistent issues regarding gender equality, as the annual report highlights. Notably, the percentage of women has not grown for more than ten years (36%). Women have little access to positions of responsibility. For example, the percentage of women occupying the 1,100 most important positions in the company stood at a meager 24% at the end of 2013. Women also face occupational gender segregation, as they are less present in technical fields. For example, the proportion of women in the networks field is 14% and in the IT field the proportion is 25% (compared to 50% in the commercial field). Concerning the gender pay gap, women earn, on average, 8% less than men.

However, FrenchTechnic does conduct a relatively committed policy on gender equality. Indeed, in 2011, the third company agreement on gender equality signed by FrenchTechnic defined proactive measures, such as the parity of preselection lists of candidates in recruitment and the definition of an additional promotion budget specifically for women. In 2014, the fourth agreement reaffirmed most of the measures of the third agreement. This policy earned FrenchTechnic several awards and certifications for gender equality, despite persistent feminization issues.

FrenchTechnic employees have a generally positive opinion about their company's position on gender equality. In a survey conducted in 2013, 66% of the 1,033 respondents declared that FrenchTechnic was a "model company" or "more advanced than average" when it came to gender equality. However, a closer look at the responses revealed a difference between men's (73%) and women's (54%) perceptions of the issue.

This company is emblematic of the situation of the majority of major French companies in terms of gender equality, namely, a committed policy coexisting alongside persistent issues. One advantage of studying such a company is that being such a large business guarantees access to a sufficiently diverse demographic (specifically, diversity in terms of gender, age and professional field). The French context is also interesting for international research on social representations of gender equality, as it is emblematic of the situation in developed countries. Indeed, the context combines legal obligations for companies (companies have to negotiate gender equality corporate agreements) and a relatively vague definition of gender equality, shaped by both French nondiscrimination laws (Lanquetin, 2009) and European laws (Dutraive and Forest, 2011). Moreover, the policies of French companies regarding gender equality have progressively incorporated practices and principles stemming from Anglo-Saxon countries (Bender, 2004); thus, a French case can help us understand the situation in Anglo-Saxon countries.

Qualitative study: research design

I carried out 101 semistructured interviews in four entities of FrenchTechnic between 2013 and 2014. I had the objective of ensuring the study of a varied demographic (public servants and employees, men and women), field of work (commercial and technical) and status (executives and employees). Table 1 gives further details about the four entities and the interviews.

In the four entities, I conducted interviews with HR staff (23 in total across the four entities), managers (40) and employees (38). The average duration of the interviews was 1 h 30 min. I took extensive notes during the interviews, which were not otherwise recorded. Indeed, I did this as a precautionary measure, fearing that the interviewees would not feel able to speak freely and frankly and would not feel at ease enough to be critical of the company and the gender equality policy. In doing so, I followed the suggestions made by Friedberg (1999) not to record the interviews but to take extensive notes. The purpose of the interviews

was to identify the perceptions and representations of gender equality at FrenchTechnic and the way in which gender equality policy was considered and applied locally. Hence, the questions were, for example, the following: *In your opinion, what are the difficulties faced by FrenchTechnic or your entity concerning gender equality? In your opinion, what are the most important gender inequalities at FrenchTechnic or in your entity? What do you think of FrenchTechnic’s policy regarding gender equality?*

I first conducted an analysis of each entity to identify the main representations of gender equality. For each entity, each interview was summarized to identify the most important themes, sustained first by descriptive codes and then by analytical codes (Anderson, 2013). This was done using broad analysis units (most of them were paragraphs). For example, one of the descriptive codes was “implementation of the gender equality policy”. In a second step, the code was divided into three analytical codes: “knowledge of the policy”, “quality of implementation”, “reasons for not implementing the policy (opposition to positive action, the issue being considered not important, etc.)”. Once the theoretical framework of the social representations had been noted, an analysis of all the interviews was conducted with a view to identifying the representations of gender equality expressed during the interviews. More precisely, for each interview, I identified the main representation of gender equality expressed by the interviewee, the most important dimension for her/him and her/his implementation of the gender equality policy. Thus, this analysis allowed me to identify the main representations, along with the relationship between the representations and the implementation of the policy.

Quantitative study: research design

An online survey. In 2015, the company asked me, as a researcher, to conduct an online survey about gender equality that aimed to identify the main concerns of the employees regarding this topic. The objective of the company was to gain insights to improve the company policy. The questionnaire, constructed around some of the results of the qualitative study, was administered online in June and July 2015. The URL link was sent by email to 10,000 employees. There were 1,413 respondents (corresponding to a return rate of 14.4%, similar to the rates observed for online surveys in this company), 45% of whom were women. This imbalance (given the 36% proportion of women at FrenchTechnic) can be explained by a selection bias: answering this survey was not mandatory, so only the workers most interested in the subject chose to answer it, and women are generally more interested in gender equality than men (Singer, 1992; Johansson and Ringblom, 2017). It should be noted that this selection bias exists for men as well as for women and for all the respondents. However, as this study focuses on the differences between respondents, the bias does not prevent us from carrying out an interesting analysis of the data. Table 2 gives further details about the respondents.

Table 2 indicates that managers and workers from support functions and computing were most interested in answering the survey. The table also shows that there were sufficient

	Entity A	Entity B	Entity C	Entity D
Size	800 employees	900 employees	900 employees	800 employees
% of women	22	39	15	43
Population	Technical entity Civil servants Executives	Commercial entity Contract staff Executives	Technical entity Civil servants Non-executive employees	Commercial entity Contract staff Non-executive employees
Number of interviews	28	24	26	23

Table 1. Interviews in the four entities

responses for each category. Hence, I chose not to adjust the sample to respect the overrepresentation of people who were more interested in the topic.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts: identification (gender, age, professional field and managerial status), representation of gender equality, perception of the role of the manager and perception of the situation of the company regarding gender equality. This research focuses on the part concerning the representation of gender equality.

Measures. The qualitative study was used to define the questions indicated in Table 3, after which the questions were grouped by axis. Each question (except in the identification section and the first question about gender equality) used a 10-point Likert scale (1 = totally

Table 2.
Respondents and the demographics of FrenchTechnic employees

		Survey	FrenchTechnic
Age	<35	134 (9.48%)	Not available
	36–45	384 (27.18%)	
	46–55	551 (39.00%)	
	56+	344 (24.35%)	
Professional field	Clients (commercial)	501 (35.66%)	40,044 (43.92%)
	Support	273 (19.43%)	12,257 (13.44%)
	Innovation	71 (5.05%)	3,042 (3.34%)
	Computing	214 (15.23%)	8,512 (9.34%)
	Networks	346 (24.63%)	27,325 (29.97%)
Managerial status	Manager	313 (22.55%)	12,688 (13.92%)
	Non-manager	1,075 (77.45%)	78,492 (86.08%)

Table 3.
Measures and questions

Axis	Questions
Profile	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Gender (2) Age (<35, 36–45, 46–55, 56+) (3) Professional field (classification defined by the company: 6 professional fields, 2 of which were regrouped, so five professional fields at the end: Clients (commercial), Support Functions, Innovation, Computing, Networks) (4) Manager or non-manager
Representation of gender equality (1). The dimensions of gender equality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) What is the main challenge to be tackled in the aim to achieve gender equality in the workplace: gender diversity, equal access to responsibilities, equal pay, or work-life balance? On a scale of 1–10, to what extent do you agree (10) or disagree with each of the following statements (2) Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by gender diversity (3) Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal access to responsibilities (4) Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal pay (5) Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by work-life balance
Representation of gender equality (2). The importance of gender equality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Gender equality in the workplace is an important social issue for me (2) Gender equality in the workplace is a fundamental company concern for me

disagree, 10 = totally agree). It has been suggested that respondents can have difficulty expressing their views on scales that use more than seven points. However, 10-point scales are generally used for surveys at FrenchTechnic, and the people are familiar with rating things on a scale of 1–10 (Dawes, 2008). Wittink and Bayer (1994), in a study comparing 10-point and 5-point scales, show that a 10-point scale is more precise, detects changes more easily, and does not require as large a sample to be reliable.

The interviews and the literature were used to identify four dimensions of gender equality: gender diversity, equal access to responsibilities, equal pay and work-life balance. This led to the formulation of questions 5–9. In the interviews, “social issue” and “company concern” were also evoked to express the importance granted to gender equality, leading to the formulation of questions 10 and 11.

Main findings: representations of gender equality and implementation of policy

Contrary to the chronological order of the research design, I first present the results from the quantitative study and then present the results from the qualitative study. This counterintuitive order is used because even though the qualitative material was collected before the quantitative material, the qualitative material helps us go deeper and thus provides the key to understanding some of the quantitative results. More precisely, I use the quantitative study to give a broad overview of the variations in social representations of gender equality within different groups. Then, I provide the results of the qualitative study, which allows me to explore in depth the meaning of the different representations of gender equality and how these representations influence the implementation of gender equality policies.

The dimensions of gender equality

The first question about the representation of gender equality deals with the main challenge faced by gender equality.

The responses (Table 4) indicate that the main challenge seems to be equal pay (for 39% of respondents), followed by equal access to responsibilities (34%) and then work-life balance (17%) and gender diversity (10%). At this point, it is difficult to know whether equal pay is considered the main challenge because there are problems regarding equal pay or because it is considered an important dimension of gender equality.

Questions 6–9 help answer this question (Table 5).

What is the main challenge to be tackled in the aim to achieve gender equality in the workplace?	%
Gender diversity	9.63%
Equal access to responsibilities	34.22%
Equal pay	39.04%
Work-life balance	17.11%

Table 4. What is the main challenge regarding gender equality?

Dimensions of gender equality	Mean	SD
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by gender diversity	6.56	2.46
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal access to responsibilities	8.46	1.81
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal pay	8.86	1.72
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by work-life balance	7.78	2.16

Table 5. The dimensions of gender equality

Table 5 shows that for the respondents, the main dimension of gender equality is equal pay (8.86), followed by equal access to responsibilities (8.46) and then work-life balance (7.78) and gender diversity (6.56). This is consistent with Table 4 and indicates that equal pay and equal access to responsibilities constitute the main challenges, because these are considered the most important dimensions.

Table 6 gives insights into the importance of gender equality. The table highlights that gender equality is considered to be more of an important social issue (8.33) than a company concern (7.79, *t*-test gives a *p*-value < 0.05).

The correlation matrix (Table 7) highlights that all the questions are positively linked. This could be because all the questions assume that some degree of importance is granted to gender equality (the various dimensions of gender equality and gender equality in general).

Variations in gender equality representations across the population

I use *t*-tests and variance analyses to estimate the differences between representations of gender equality according to gender, age, professional field and managerial status.

Gender. Table 8 presents, for each question, the mean for the whole sample, as well as the mean for female respondents and the mean for male respondents. A *t*-test (student's test) enables me to check whether the difference between the mean for women and the mean for men is significant.

Table 8 shows that there are significant differences between men and women.

Regarding the representation of gender equality, it is interesting to note that women attach more importance than men to every dimension (e.g. 9.23 for women versus 8.56 for men for the statement "Gender equality in the workplace is primarily characterized by equal pay"). However, the hierarchy of the dimensions is the same for men and women: for both, equal pay is considered to be the most important dimension of gender equality, followed by equal access to responsibilities, work-life balance and gender diversity. Table 8 also shows that women give more importance than men to gender equality, both as a social issue (8.78 versus 7.96) and as a company concern (8.25 versus 7.41).

Professional field. There are five proposed professional fields. Variance analysis was used to check whether the representations of gender equality differ between the fields (Table 9).

Even though the hierarchy of the dimensions of gender equality stays the same regardless of the professional field, Table 9 indicates that differences can be identified according to

Table 6.
The importance of
gender equality

Importance of gender equality	Mean	SD
Gender equality is an important social issue for me	8.33	2.00
Gender equality is a fundamental company concern for me	7.79	2.13

Table 7.
Correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender diversity					
2. Equal access to responsibilities	0.21*				
3. Equal pay	0.10	0.49*			
4. Work-life balance	0.18*	0.23*	0.30*		
5. Important social issue	0.24*	0.47*	0.42*	0.22*	
6. Fundamental company concern	0.21*	0.44*	0.37*	0.20*	0.78*

Note(s): * = *p*-value < 0.01

Table 8. Representations of gender equality by gender

Question	Mean (sd)	F (sd)	M (sd)	t-test
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by gender diversity	6.56 (2.46)	6.71 (2.26)	6.45 (2.61)	*
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal access to responsibilities	8.46 (1.81)	8.77 (1.51)	8.20 (1.98)	***
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal pay	8.86 (1.72)	9.23 (1.27)	8.56 (1.97)	***
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by work-life balance	7.78 (2.16)	8.10 (1.98)	7.53 (2.26)	***
Gender equality in the workplace is an important social issue for me	8.33 (2.00)	8.78 (1.55)	7.96 (2.24)	***
Gender equality in the workplace is a fundamental company concern for me	7.79 (2.13)	8.25 (1.81)	7.41 (2.30)	***

Note(s): Asterisks indicate the level of significance: *: 0.1; **: 0.05; ***: 0.01

Question	Mean (sd)	Clients	Support	Innov	Comput	Networks	VA
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by gender diversity	6.56 (2.46)	6.64 (2.42)	6.43 (2.40)	6.39 (2.37)	6.21 (2.64)	6.81 (2.46)	*
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal access to responsibilities	8.46 (1.81)	8.58 (1.66)	8.37 (1.91)	8.34 (2.01)	8.55 (1.62)	8.36 (1.94)	
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal pay	8.86 (1.72)	8.93 (1.66)	8.94 (1.61)	8.51 (2.08)	8.76 (1.64)	8.86 (1.86)	
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by work-life balance	7.78 (2.16)	7.99 (1.98)	7.87 (2.09)	7.71 (2.25)	7.44 (2.24)	7.65 (2.36)	**
Gender equality in the workplace is an important social issue for me	8.33 (2.00)	8.47 (1.89)	8.30 (2.14)	8.42 (1.98)	8.23 (1.95)	8.24 (2.03)	
Gender equality in the workplace is a fundamental company concern for me	7.84 (2.21)	7.96 (1.95)	7.72 (2.26)	7.97 (2.14)	7.72 (2.15)	7.63 (2.23)	

Note(s): Asterisks indicate the level of significance: * = 0.1, ** = 0.05, *** = 0.01

Table 9. Representations of gender equality by professional field

professional field with regard to the importance granted to gender diversity (more important for “Networks”, a technical field where the proportion of women is the lowest: 6.81 versus 6.56 for the whole sample), and for the importance of work-life balance (more important for the commercial field, “Clients”: 7.99 versus 7.78 for the whole sample). To check that this variation is not due solely to the fact that both genders are unequally represented in the different professional fields, I looked at the cross-tabulation between gender and professional

field. The variation between professional fields remains verified even when crossing them with gender [1]. However, innovation and computing are also technical fields, and the importance granted to gender diversity seems less pronounced. Hence, the importance granted to gender diversity and work-life balance varies according to the professional field, but gender diversity is not valued at the same level in every technical field.

Management. Finally, *t*-tests were used to check variations according to managerial status (Table 10).

Table 10 indicates that managers grant more importance than non-managers to gender diversity (6.84 versus 6.47) but less to equal pay (8.68 versus 8.92) and work-life balance (7.52 versus 7.87). However, the hierarchy of dimensions is the same (equal pay, equal access to responsibilities, work-life balance and gender diversity). In general, managers tend to grant more importance to gender equality as a social issue (8.50 versus 8.29) and as a company concern (7.98 versus 7.74).

We can see then that there are several representations of gender equality in this company and that they especially vary according to gender, professional field and managerial status. Now, to fully answer the research question, the qualitative study is used to explore in-depth the meaning of these representations and whether such representations influence the implementation of policy.

The meaning of the gender equality representations and dimensions

The interviewees grant more or less importance to various dimensions of gender equality. For a group of employees, specifically male employees in technical fields (entities A and C), gender diversity is the most important dimension: when they speak about gender equality, they spontaneously mention only gender diversity measures. In particular, they mention gender diversity in recruitment and the fact that it remains difficult to recruit women in technical fields.

There are no women doing our work. On the other hand, at *** (a commercial entity), there are many more women than men. [...] I have nothing against gender equality, I'm in favor of it, but then we should see if women really want to work like us, to be outside, in the winter, because it's not only in the summer, in the summer we're fine, but in the winter it's cold... So, then we should see if women want to work like us. – Technician employee, male (entity C)

Some employees seem to think that the history of public administration is a guarantee against unequal pay and unequal access to responsibilities (entities A and C). Hence, these employees

Question	Mean (sd)	Manager	Non-man	<i>t</i> -test
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by gender diversity	6.56 (2.46)	6.84 (2.27)	6.47 (2.51)	**
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal access to responsibilities	8.46 (1.81)	8.51 (1.69)	8.45 (1.85)	
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by equal pay	8.86 (1.72)	8.68 (1.89)	8.92 (1.67)	*
Gender equality in the workplace is characterized primarily by work-life balance	7.78 (2.16)	7.52 (2.31)	7.87 (2.11)	**
Gender equality in the workplace is an important social issue for me	8.33 (2.00)	8.50 (1.76)	8.29 (2.07)	*
Gender equality in the workplace is a fundamental company concern for me	7.79 (2.13)	7.98 (1.96)	7.74 (2.18)	*

Note(s): Asterisks indicate the level of significance: * = 0.1, ** = 0.05, *** = 0.01

Table 10. Representations of gender equality by managerial status

do not consider equal pay or equal access to responsibilities to be important dimensions of gender equality.

In our old civil service system, we have many people who entered with the same index grid, so there is no problem with equal pay. [...] There is no discrimination here. My wife works for a private company, and she does not have the same salary as the other employees, her career has evolved less quickly, and she does not know why, so she fights. Here, it's not possible since we have index grids. – Manager in a technical field, male (entity A)

Another group of employees, composed mainly of female employees and executives in commercial fields (entities B and D), tends to have a wider appreciation of the issues surrounding gender equality, including equal pay, equal access to responsibilities and work-life balance. For example, they are aware of the difficulties faced by women in balancing their personal and professional lives.

Now, in everyday life there are still things to be done [to achieve gender equality]. It takes a long time to be promoted, even though I have benefited a lot from internal promotion. I still have the impression that for equal performance, there's no equal recognition. My perception is that it takes longer for women to be promoted. – Executive in a commercial field, female (entity B)

As a woman, when you have young children, given the nursery school hours, our work is penalizing. When my daughters were little, I used to work in a shop in the city center, where we finished earlier than here, that's why I stayed in that shop for a long time. – Employee in a commercial field, female (entity D)

This finding could be explained by the fact that the women are more aware of the existence of gender inequalities. In addition, work-life balance constitutes an important issue in the commercial sector (mainly in entity D) because absenteeism is much more problematic than in the technical sector. This can explain why employees working in the commercial field spontaneously mention work-life balance as an important dimension of gender equality.

Three years ago, we launched a study into the home-to-business travel times of all our employees. We are very attentive to what is called the "work-life balance". [...] If you are late, it is problematic for your colleague because it takes two people to open the shop, if there is a robbery it is the responsibility of the company. – HR, commercial field, female (entity D)

As the gender equality policy necessarily involves managers, an important communication plan is addressed to them at FrenchTechnic, with a presentation of the gender equality policy and training. The interviews show that managers are indeed more sensitized than non-managers to the whole notion of gender equality and that they have a general conception of the various dimensions of gender equality. In fact, the managers grant more importance to gender equality in general.

I changed my Executive Committee. I decided to have 50% women on my Executive Committee. The idea was not to say that "I have 50% women on my Committee", the idea was to use the women's pool. I also invested in mentoring actions... In the space of a year and a half, we got a lot of prizes for gender equality. – Director, Technical entity, male (entity C)

In summary, the interviews and the quantitative study show the following:

- (1) Women are more aware than men of the whole notion of gender equality, including work-life balance and equal access to responsibilities, as well as gender diversity and equal pay. They grant more importance to gender equality in general.
- (2) Perceptions of gender equality are linked to the professional field, with a focus on gender diversity in technical fields that are poorly feminized and a focus on work-life balance in commercial fields where absenteeism is much more troublesome. This

means that perceptions of gender equality are deeply linked to professional and local contexts.

- (3) Managers tend to be better acquainted with the issue of gender equality and to be more sensitized than non-managers to the various forms of gender inequality. This may be because an important communication plan is addressed to them.

The influence of social representations on policy implementation

The qualitative study shows that the arguments mobilized by actors to justify the decision not to implement a measure are often based on their representations of gender equality. For example, one manager who thinks that there are no problems concerning equal pay confesses that he uses the budget dedicated to bridge the gender pay gap to grant individual raises.

I'll be honest, there are things we do on the Steering Committee... We have a budget for individual raises of x% and a budget to correct the gender pay gap of x%, and we put individual raises on the catch-up budget when they concern women. But it is because we see that there is no gender pay gap.
– Manager, male (entity C)

In a technical entity where the interviewees tend to reduce gender equality to gender diversity (entity C), the measures concerning this dimension (mainly related to recruitment) are better-known than the other measures. Conversely, in a commercial entity where gender equality is mainly defined in relation to work-life balance (entity D), the measures concerning this dimension (mainly relating to parenthood) are better known and better implemented.

Pregnant women can arrive later, leave earlier. That's not a problem. Schedules can also be adapted.
– Manager, female (entity D)

Moreover, individuals who are not convinced of the necessity of gender equality tend to be more reluctant to implement a gender equality policy, as do employees who do not attach much importance to gender equality. An executive from a commercial entity (entity B) explains how the Human Resources Director, a man not at all convinced of the necessity of gender equality, fails to implement the company policy.

In our entity, I think that gender equality is not looked at. F***[the entity's HRD] is not a driving force on the subject. He is gradually becoming so, under pressure, but gender equality still receives very little support. For equal pay, we do not look at it at all, I cannot tell you, I think there could potentially be problems. – Executive, female (entity B)

In summary, these findings support the idea that representations of gender equality might influence the implementation of the gender equality policy. More precisely, the link between representations and implementation seems polymorphic. First of all, someone who attaches great importance to a dimension tends to know the policy concerning this dimension better. In addition to being better acquainted with the policy, this person tends to be more committed to its implementation. In contrast, someone who thinks that a particular dimension is not an issue to be addressed might be reluctant to make efforts to implement the policy, especially when it appears to favor women.

Positive actions tend to irritate me because on my journey I have not felt any obvious imbalance to the disadvantage of women. – HR, commercial field, male (entity D)

Discussion

This research focuses on social representations of gender equality in the workplace in France. A case study was conducted at a French technical company. This large company faces

persistent issues regarding gender equality but has managed to outline a relatively committed policy on gender equality. The size of the company and the fact that the company encompasses different types of positions make it possible to study variations in the representations of gender equality. Moreover, the fact that the company puts forward a committed policy makes it possible to study the influence of these representations on the implementation of the policy.

First, the results indicate that workers at this French technical company tend to define gender equality across several areas: gender diversity, equal pay, equal access to responsibilities and work-life balance. The theoretical framework of social representation, which encourages considering the relative importance granted to each dimension of a notion, helps conceptualize the quantitative results. The central core (the most important element of a notion (Abric, 2005)) of gender equality is constituted by equal pay and equal access to responsibilities, whereas work-life balance and gender diversity are considered less important. This result contradicts previous studies that insist on the importance given to gender diversity in France (Fraisie, 2004; Bereni and Revillard, 2007). This can be because internal communication at FrenchTechnic puts great emphasis on equal pay and equal access to responsibilities. This highlights that social representations are partly shaped by the discursive context. The importance granted to equal pay is reassuring because the gender pay gap is a result of other inequalities (training and occupational segregation, unequal access to responsibilities; see Laufer, 2014). Even if the gender pay gap remains relatively weak at this company compared to the national level, it is still high (8% compared with approximately 15 %). The research also shows that even if work-life balance is considered less important than equal pay, for example, it is included in gender equality for workers, which has been less obvious, as work-life balance has been integrated into the notion of gender equality more recently than equal pay or gender diversity (Lewis, 2006). However, this may be because this company has fully integrated work-life balance into its gender equality policy. Finally, the mean scores reported for each dimension of gender equality are very high (between 6 and 9 out of 10), which indicate a certain level of sensitization toward the topic. Nonetheless, this can be explained by a selection bias. Since answering the questionnaire was not mandatory, it can be assumed that only the employees most interested in gender equality chose to answer it.

Following previous studies on social representations, which record that representations usually vary according to an individual's history (Methivier, 2012) and the sociological group in which the individual is embedded (Allansdottir *et al.*, 1993; Jodelet, 2003; Moscovici, 2003), this research also studies variations in gender equality representations among workers. The quantitative part of the research shows that the hierarchy of the four dimensions (equal pay, equal access to responsibilities, work-life balance and gender diversity) remains the same regardless of gender, professional field and managerial status. Additionally, the quantitative research indicates that variations in the population are not very important. This means that the central core of gender equality does not vary according to individual dimensions, which is surprising and contradicts previous studies on social representations (Allansdottir *et al.*, 1993). Indeed, studies on social representations generally tend to highlight the importance of variations in representations among groups, according to individuals (Methivier, 2012). This difference may be attributed to the fact that representations of gender equality are partly shaped by the policy of the company regarding this topic. Indeed, this would explain why the workers within the same organization hierarchize various dimensions of gender equality in the same order. This emphasizes the need for studies on social representations to take into account the mesolevel (company policy). Indeed, studies on social representations rarely take into account the fact that individuals are embedded in groups, for example, organizations, and that the group level can homogenize their representations. However, the material allows me to consider not only the relative but also the absolute importance granted to each

dimension and to show that there are variations in this importance according to gender, professional field and managerial status. These results are consistent with the body of the academic literature dedicated to social studies on gender, while also supplementing it. This research demonstrates that gender is a significant structuring variable in the representation of gender equality. In the quantitative as well as in the qualitative parts of the research, men tend to grant less importance to each dimension of gender equality and to gender equality in general. This is consistent with the academic literature, which highlights that gender equality remains a matter for women and not for men (Snizek and Neil, 1992; Acker, 2006). The influence of the professional field on representations of gender equality is poorly studied in such academic literature. The results show that employees in less feminized fields give more importance to gender diversity than other employees and that employees in the most feminized fields attach more importance to work-life balance than other employees. Managerial status also plays a role: managers grant more importance than non-managers to gender diversity but less to equal pay and work-life balance. This is surprising, as the managers play a more important role in equal pay and, above all, in work-life balance (Beauregard, 2014) than in gender diversity. However, the company discourse addressed to the managers about the benefits of gender equality for the company insists on the importance of having gender-diverse teams. It seems important to note that the quantitative study tends to minimize variations, whereas the qualitative study tends to focus on the variety of representations. This can be for several reasons. First, such differences can exist because in the survey, the different dimensions (gender diversity, equal pay, etc.) were not defined, so each respondent could give a different meaning to the dimensions. Second, this difference can be explained by the format of the questions in the survey: respondents had to give the degree of their approval on statements such as “gender equality in the workplace is primarily characterized by gender diversity” and thus could have given the same degree of approval to every statement, which would have allowed them to avoid having to choose between each dimension. Third, quantitative and qualitative studies are set up to reveal different things (Burke Johnson *et al.*, 2007). This reality is exacerbated in this research by the fact that qualitative and quantitative parts do not have an equal status. Indeed, the qualitative material is partly used to understand why there are variations in representations within the population.

This research also deals with the implications of these variations in terms of policy implementation. The qualitative part reveals that the representation of gender equality is often used as an argument to justify noncompliance with policy. This also suggests that such a policy is better implemented by the people most convinced by the rationale for gender equality and its importance. Furthermore, the research suggests that the importance granted to each dimension of gender equality can influence the way that the policy is implemented. For example, someone who grants more importance to gender diversity tends to implement better measures concerning this dimension than other dimensions. This finding can be explained by the fact that the implementation of gender equality policies depends on the goodwill of individuals (Coron and Pigeyre, 2019). In addition, gender equality measures can be considered to favor women, and this might lead to resistance on behalf of people who are not aware of gender inequalities (Essig and Soparnot, 2019). However, thus far, the link between representations of gender equality and the implementation of policy has been poorly studied. Scala and Paterson (2017) and Perrier (2015) show that the way local implementers understand and define gender mainstreaming influences their implementation of this type of policy. More specifically, Perrier (2015) highlights that the necessary involvement of nonexperts in the implementation of gender equality policies constitutes a barrier because of the variation in representations between experts and nonexperts. However, both studies deal with public policies and to my knowledge, there has been very little research on the link between representations and policy implementation at the company level. The results of this

research highlight the relevance of the disaggregation strategies introduced by [Ertan \(2016\)](#). Ertan suggests considering each dimension of gender equality separately to study the policies on this topic, as a great amount of information is lost when all these dimensions are aggregated in only a single measurement. The research presented here suggests that conducting a disaggregation strategy to study the situation of a company regarding gender equality can be an interesting research avenue.

Conclusion

This research deals with social representations of gender equality in France, a subject that has been largely neglected or overlooked in existing gender research fields. The international literature on gender equality shows that variations in representations of gender equality constitute a major subject for research and policies on gender, whatever the country. However, this topic still remains inadequately addressed. This paper aims to strengthen the research literature dedicated to the issue of gender equality.

Theoretically, this research complements the existing academic literature on gender, in that very few studies deal with social representations of gender equality in the workplace, in France or elsewhere. Some studies examine the notion that “organizational cultures are not genderless” ([Gherardi and Poggio, 2001, 257](#)), as organizational culture can put in place gender-biased organizational practices and define gendered “ideal worker” norms ([Kelly et al., 2010](#); [Stainback et al., 2016](#)), but the studies do not address the implications of this statement for representations of gender equality. In addition, while there is an abundance of research that uncovers the multidimensionality of gender equality in general and at the macrolevel ([Annesley et al., 2015](#); [Ertan, 2016](#); [Pettersson et al., 2017](#)), very few studies pay attention to the specific multidimensionality of gender equality in the workplace, and even fewer studies to that within a company, at a mesolevel ([Ely and Padavic, 2007](#)). To my knowledge, there is little or no existing research linking gender equality and social representations or linking representations of gender equality and policy implementation. This paper highlights that gender equality in the workplace can mean several things, with equal pay and equal access to responsibilities constituting the central core of this notion. The paper also indicates that the importance granted to gender equality varies according to gender, professional field and managerial status. This research also highlights that the social representation of a concept (gender equality) is expressed in practices (implementation of gender equality policies). The research calls for an enrichment of the literature on social representations, incorporating social representations of practices and policies.

From a managerial perspective, these results strongly indicate that companies not only in France but also in other developed countries should consider carrying out awareness campaigns aimed at employees to promote a common culture and definition of gender equality. Indeed, the coexistence of various representations of gender equality partly explains the insufficient implementation—and thus the poor performance and general effectiveness of—gender equality policies, both in theoretical and practical terms. Companies should also consider introducing awareness campaigns that specifically target men, who grant less importance to gender equality than women. Sensitizing men to gender inequalities is necessary to ensure that a gender equality policy is well-perceived and applied. Finally, companies should conduct studies to identify the main representations of gender equality within the company: this can be useful to better understand why some measures that fall under the category of gender equality policy are unknown or not applied and in so doing, companies can better equip themselves to develop adequate training or communication campaigns.

However, this research both raises further questions and opens up new research perspectives.

First, the dimensions of gender equality studied in the survey were restricted to gender diversity, equal access to responsibilities, equal pay and work-life balance. However, the notion of gender equality in the workplace is of course broader and can also include, for instance, action against sexual harassment. Additionally, respondents were not asked about their perception of more controversial measures, such as quota policies (Brandth and Bjørkhaug, 2015; Labelle *et al.*, 2015) and other proactive measures. However, the interviews showed strong opposition from certain actors toward these types of measures, and as such, this issue leaves scope for an interesting complementary research project.

Second, the empirical material suggests that each dimension (gender diversity, equal access to responsibilities, equal pay and work-life balance) could have different meanings for employees, especially in the questionnaire. I have not raised this point in this paper since this was a rather marginal phenomenon. However, I think that these variations could be much more important when considering not a single company but various companies in various sectors. Hence, in another quantitative study, it would be useful to include a pre-given definition of each dimension in the questionnaire to avoid this phenomenon.

Third, this research was conducted in a French company possessing certain specificities (historical public administration, commitment to gender equality), which partly prevents one from drawing generalized conclusions from the results regarding the situation in France and other countries in general. However, this choice of a company does guarantee the avoidance of exogenous variations and increases the internal validity of the study. At this stage, this research demonstrates the need for a broader study on social representations of gender equality in the workplace. The variations identified within one French company suggest that they are even greater at the macrolevel and international level. Hence, it would be most illuminating to conduct a larger research on this topic. In particular, an international comparative analysis would be of real interest.

Fourth, it would be interesting to explore further the relationship between the representations and the implementation of policy. In this research, I asked workers about their representation of gender equality on the one hand and their implementation of the policy on the other hand, and I deduced the relationship myself. It would certainly be very interesting to ask the workers about this link. Moreover, the use of social representations to study the implementation of gender equality policies constitutes a promising line of inquiry for research that seeks to explain the difficult implementation of gender equality policies highlighted by several studies (Laufer, 2008).

Note

1. The cross-tabulations are not given in the tables, as they were simply a mean to check the validity of the results given in Table 9.

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