Impact of the presence of women on public sector and private corporations in Quebec: what may be learned from the multiple discourses of board members?

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Abstract: This study presents a qualitative research conducted with boards of directors in large organisations from various sectors of the Quebec economy. From a critical perspective, this research documents element related to the perceived impact of the presence of women on boards through the members discourse and the boards practices. The results show that the two types of discourse mentioned in the literature – competence and individual gendered – are present among board members. The results reveal the presence of a discourse on diversity distinct from the other two. Perceived as a catalyst for change, that discourse attaches importance to the significant impact of mixing men and women. However, in the respondents diversity discourse, few tangible changes in gender dynamic within boards are observed. This study highlights the relevance of examining the presence and impact of women on boards from a new angle with a perspective that goes beyond statistical data and multiple discourses.

Keywords: boards of directors; women; organisations; Québec; impact; diversity; discourse; gender; changes.
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1 Introduction

The under-representation of women in executive positions is a subject that regularly makes the headlines of newspapers and studies all over the world. Recent statistics produced by Catalyst (2016) show that in SandP 500 companies in the USA, women hold 19.9% of board seats. In Canada, a study of Fortune 100 corporate boards shows that the percentage of women is only 15.9% (Catalyst, 2014) and a recent study compiling information published in the annual report of 60 of Quebec’s largest companies indicates that women hold 20% of the seats (Bédard and Brière, 2015).

Given this representation gap due particularly to the ‘Old Boy’s Club’ culture, the appointment process, family responsibilities and a lack of self-confidence, different mechanisms were implemented to allow better representation of women on boards of
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Directors. They include a pool of candidates, networking, mentoring and training opportunities, a bill much like Bill 59 adopted by the Quebec Government in 2006 (Brière and Rinfret, 2010) and, in 2010, an approach adopted by Canada for companies listed on the stock exchange based on the principle of ‘comply or explain’ accompanied by goals, deadlines and precise reports (Bédard and Brière, 2015). In this context, several studies address the issue from different perspectives. These studies attempt to demonstrate the benefits of gender parity on boards, notably the positive impact of the feminisation of boards on company performance from an economic perspective (Abbott et al., 2012; Campbell and Minguez-Vera, 2008; Francoeur et al., 2008; Galbreath, 2011; Rodriguez-Dominguez et al., 2012). According to Catalyst (2012), the presence of women on boards improves corporate profitability with economic gains of up to 35%. Their presence has an impact on the organisation’s leadership style and improves its corporate image (Burgess and Tharenou, 2002; Burke, 2003; Elstad and Ladegard, 2012; Galbreath, 2011; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Machold et al., 2008; Nielsen and Huse, 2010a; Terjesen et al., 2009).

This correlation between the presence of women and organisational performance suggests interesting research avenues that require further evaluation. Studies have been conducted mainly from a financial or economic standpoint, leaving little room for critical thinking to help analyse the true meaning and scope of this impact, which goes beyond the number of women on boards or the correlation between the presence of women and financial performance.

In this context, few studies have analysed the impact of women beyond the study of women’s individual trajectories. Few have considered the contextual and cultural dimensions of organisations (Lee-Gosselin et al., 2013) and analysed the impact from a perspective where organisations do not naturally represent open and accessible spaces, and where success is based solely on competence, willpower and personal effort (Bhavnani, 2007). As mentioned by Calas et al. (2014), a new theoretical approach, referred to as gendering organisations, is useful to de-naturalise the common meaning of gender using a processual, social constructionist approach. This critical perspective seeks to reveal and explain the systemic and gendered inequalities that manifest themselves at the structural, normative, organisational and behavioural levels.

Thus, from a critical perspective, the main question underlying this study is: Does a significant presence of women have an impact on a board that contributes to modifying and establishing new gendered social relationships within the board’s process and practices?

The objective of this study is to document the impact of the presence of women on boards based on board members’ discourses. Organisations from various sectors of the Quebec economy were targeted in a context where state-owned corporations show a significant increase in the number of women on boards of directors and where certain private corporations are increasing the number of women on their boards. A data collection strategy was used in an original research study conducted on some 20 boards of directors of large private corporations and public or government enterprises with a large percentage of women on their boards.

Our research makes a new contribution because it studies boards of directors in the public and private sectors composed of a large number of women and explores the multiple discourses of board members to ascertain possible changes in board practices and dynamics. This study seeks to demonstrate that processes and practices leading to gender and other inequities can be changed. Instead of viewing women from the single
traditional standpoints of individual trajectories and capacity building, this study explores contextual and structural elements of the board to discover whether a diversity of administrators has a real impact and is indeed involved in the creation of a new organisational culture.

This study stands apart because it is based on the experience of senior leaders of organisations directly involved in the possible changes to board dynamics caused by the presence of women as opposed, for example, to the perception of external factors such as shareholders. The perception of these actors is relevant, but remains dependent on information provided by the board of directors. It seems clear that the experience of these senior leaders, members of a wide variety of boards and witnesses to the arrival of more women, can contribute to the study of this phenomenon.

The current literature review shows the presence of a discourse that emphasises the distinctive contributions of women and a discourse that emphasises gender neutrality in favour of individual competences. This study seeks to determine if these elements are present in the discourse of top executives, if there is another discourse in addition to these elements, and if the contribution of these multiples discourses could improve knowledge about the impact of presence of women on the boards. It is relevant to anchor these discourses in practice in order to discover whether they are showcases of significant change or merely corroborations of existing stereotypes.

2 Theoretical framework

There is a growing body of literature addressing the impact of the presence of women on boards of directors. Most studies are conducted from an individual perspective that addresses the adoption of attributes, behaviours and standards valued by the majority, or from an organisational perspective based on competences that present decisions, practices and individuals with a neutral vision devoid of gender inequities or gender differences. These studies are part of a current of thought aimed at theorising gender in organisations that views sex as a biological characteristic – male and female – and gender as a social or cultural categorisation usually associated with a person, where masculinity and femininity are often perceived simply as traits or roles (Calas et al., 2014). Those normative and individual approaches emphasise the differences between men and women or depict organisations as neutral places without differentiated relationships between men and women (Calas et al., 2014). This current reveals a certain paradox (Pesonen et al., 2009) that creates some confusion as to how to understand the phenomenon. On the one hand, from an individual gendered perspective, the presence of women on boards has a significant impact. Conversely, from the standpoint of competence and organisational neutrality, the presence of women on boards of directors is neutral and women have no differential impacts on these dimensions.

2.1 Individual gendered perspective

The individual gendered perspective focuses on feminine attributes on the board and emphasises essential differences between men and women (Adam and Funk, 2012; Bart and McQueen, 2013; Pesonen et al., 2009; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005). Women are also more likely to have higher levels of board accountability, ensure more effective communication among the board and its stakeholders, and more actively promote
nonfinancial performance measures (Brown et al., 2002). Machold et al. (2008) also argue that feminist ethics can provide a different lens through which to analyse corporate governance.

Women also make specific contributions to boards. The presence of women on boards coincides with the introduction of new governance practices that can enhance board independence (Adams and Ferreira, 2009; Adams and Funk, 2012; Brown et al., 2002; Fondas and Sassalos, 2000; Konrad et al., 2008; Machold et al., 2008; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004). Women bring a different voice to debate and decision making (Bart and McQueen, 2013; Liswood, 2015; Nielsen and Huse, 2010b).

Women also positively influence boardroom behaviour and masculine culture (Bilimoria, 2000; Fondas and Sassalos, 2000; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Nielsen and Huse, 2010a; Singh, 2008). The presence of women in the boardroom leads to more civilised behaviour and sensitivity to other perspectives (Bilimoria, 2000; Fondas and Sassalos, 2000; Singh, 2008), and women lighten up the boardroom atmosphere (Huse and Solberg, 2006). Several authors (Allemand and Brulébaut, 2014; Erkut et al., 2008; Joecks et al., 2012; Kakabadse et al., 2015; Kanter, 1977; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011) claim that real change and true innovation occur when there are three or more women on the board, or as long as they attain the critical mass. The critical mass theory developed by Kanter (1977) suggests that the nature of intergroup relations depends on the size of the minority. When the size of the minority shifts from tokenism to critical mass, a qualitative change will occur in the nature of group interactions. Although Kanter’s theoretical model (1977) based on the critical mass suggests that the increased presence of women in management positions could change the cultural dynamics of organisations (Eliev and Bernier, 2003), Toé (2014) raises the problem of the symbolism of women on boards of directors.

The number of female corporate directors is positively related to the number of women in the organisation holding line management jobs and high-ranking titles, the number of women among the top earners of the company and to a critical mass of female officers (Bilimoria, 2000, 2006; Cook and Glass, 2014; Ding and Charoenwong, 2004; Larrieta-Rubín et al., 2015; Matsa and Miller, 2011; Sealy, 2008; Singh, 2008; Singh et al., 2006; Skaggs et al., 2012; Terjesen and Singh, 2008). Female directors are good at networking with other women (Bilimoria, 2000; Singh et al., 2006).

Furthermore, several research studies claim that there is a relationship between the presence of female directors and financial performance (Abbott et al., 2012; Bianchi and Iatridis, 2014; Burke, 2000; Francoeur et al., 2008; Garcia-Meca et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2010; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004, 2001). Women on boards are also relevant to investors, shareholders, stakeholders, product sales targets, and social responsiveness (Bilimoria, 2000; Brown et al., 2002; Galbreath, 2011; Perrault, 2015). Women are more oriented towards aspects of corporate responsibility and corporate reputation than men, and more concerned about economic performance (Boulouza, 2013; Williams, 2003; Zhang et al., 2013).

As for studies within the gendered discourse, many individual-level explanations for the restricted access of women are based on the myth of women’s insufficient experience or lack of adequate human capital (Singh et al., 2008). One of the explanations is that women are not sufficiently qualified to fulfil these roles despite a large number of them having obtained degrees (Burke, 2000; Singh et al., 2008). With regards to the gender discourse and according to Pesonen et al. (2009), male characteristics are represented as
necessary qualities for successful work on corporate boards. Holgersson (2013) suggests that homosociality is present and accomplished by defining competence and establishing hierarchy.

### 2.2 Competence or neutral perspective

In the competence discourse, the essential sameness of men and women is emphasised. This discourse is based on the assumption that the most competent individuals are invited to join corporate boards (Pesonen et al., 2009). According to Bradshaw and Wicks (2000), female directors have no feminist change agenda because their priorities are the same as those of male directors: protecting shareholder value. Given this, women directors are more likely to be found in the largest connected component of the mixed gender network, thereby indicating that they are not marginalised (Hawarden and Marsland, 2011). In this approach, women appointed to boards of directors have the same competences as their male counterparts.

According to Huse (2008), there is no relationship between the proportion of women directors and the openness of the board culture. Mathisen et al. (2013) show that there were generally few differences in the way female and male directors experienced boardroom dynamics, and female chairpersons did not perceive the dynamics differently than other female directors. With regards to the competence discourse, the average effect of gender diversity on a firm’s performance is negative (Adams and Ferreira, 2009; Simpson et al., 2010). Consistent with ‘glass cliff’ research, there was a negative relationship between women’s presence on boards and ‘subjective’ stock-based measures of performance.

Although the competence perspective (or skills approach) is a hallmark of supposed organisational neutrality, two phenomena intrinsically linked to the integration of women on boards of directors explain their under-representation: resistance to change and the institutionalisation of equality between the sexes.

From a structural perspective, resistance to change refers to the dominant culture within boards of directors, a predominantly male-oriented culture of white men commonly referred to as the ‘Old Boy’s Club’ (Eliev and Bernier, 2003), where men are nominated on the basis of their social network rather than their expertise (Tremblay et al., 2016). The principle of social reproduction (Berger and Luckman, 1997; Holgersson, 2013) allows us to establish a relationship between the male-oriented culture and the under-representation of women on boards of directors. Masculine domination can often operate without having to justify itself: “The androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it” (Bourdieu, 2001, quoted in Tremblay et al., 2016, p.171). According to advocates of this approach, few women possess the competences sought and valued for a board position.

### 2.3 Policy or legislation

To offset the phenomenon of social reproduction and discrimination toward women, some governments have adopted a policy or legislation regulating the nomination of directors. Several studies have addressed the imposition of quotas on governance bodies and boards of directors, often criticised for being closed and exclusively reserved for white men from similar backgrounds (Toé, 2014). According to some studies, mandating gender quotas for directors caused a significant drop in stock prices following the
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announcement of the law and might also reduce the corporate value of well-governed firms (Adams and Ferreira, 2009; Ahern and Dittmar, 2012; Chapple and Humphrey, 2013; Ding and Charoenwong, 2004; Haslam et al., 2010; Lee and James, 2007). Quotas result in younger and less experienced boards, increases in leverage and acquisitions, and deteriorations in operating performance. However, Carter et al. (2010) and Chapple and Humphrey (2013) find no evidence of an association between diversity and performance. According to Ding and Charoenwong (2004), and Bradshaw and Wicks (2000), there is no relationship between the proportion of women on a board and shareholder value. Likewise, Ibrahim and Angelidis (1995) find that there are no significant gender differences with regard to the legal and ethical dimensions of corporate responsibility.

Although several studies exploring the impact of imposing restrictive legislation on the increase in the number of female directors on boards of directors have outlined the negative effects on human capital within boards, others have arrived at the opposite conclusion. Indeed, according to Grosvold et al. (2007), the rapid growth in board diversity in Norway has been achieved without any decline in the quality of female directors. More recently, a study showed that although France has adopted restrictive legislation to quickly increase female representation on boards of directors, their recruiting posed no more of a problem than in Canada where such legislation does not exist (Allemand et al., 2016).

This leads us to question whether women can participate in decision making and truly have their qualifications recognised when they occupy a position to which they were appointed in response to the parity requirement (Toé, 2014), rather than in response to the quest for efficiency (Burgess and Tharenou, 2002), thereby raising fears among some members that incompetent women are sitting on boards of directors in the name of gender parity and diversity (Tremblay et al., 2016).

Given this difference of opinions in the literature, the study will attempt to determine whether the dialogue of board members is restricted to the two perspectives (individual gendered and neutral) (Table 1) or whether it is a precursor to the emergence of another discourse or perspective that might produce real change in board practices and dynamics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Perspectives in the literature review</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Individual gendered perspective</strong></td>
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<td>Feminine attributes</td>
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<td>Women’ positive contributions on board</td>
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<td>Relationship between the presence of female directors and financial performance</td>
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<td>Women’s insufficient experience or lack of adequate human capital</td>
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### 3 Method

In Quebec, where 21 state-owned corporations globally reached gender parity in 2011 on their boards of directors in compliance with Bill 59, and where some private corporations are increasing the number of women on their boards, we found the situation...
to be totally relevant to pursue the study objective. The data collection strategy consisted of conducting a study on boards of directors of large private corporations and public or government corporations (state-owned) of comparable size and similar business sectors (finance and insurance; information, cultural industry and professional services; transport, real estate and retailing) with a large percentage of women on their boards (between 21.4% and 66%).

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research project, consistent with the goal of documenting items related to the impact of the presence of women on boards of directors, based on the discourse of board members and board practices. The research strategy used here was the survey, an appropriate strategy when the purpose of the study is to understand, rather than merely describe, a complex phenomenon under real conditions of application (Huberman and Miles, 1991; Yin, 2004). The purpose of the survey was not to systematically analyse the speeches delivered by the targeted persons, but to conduct interviews where content analysis would make it possible to identify elements establishing different types of discourse. This first-of-its-kind survey served not only to describe variability – both within the boards of directors and their business sectors – but also to understand how this variability might be explained by the conditions prevalent in a sector where a given board is active. Finally, this method enhanced the explanatory power of the study, confirming that the events and processes observed in a given workplace were not outliers (Gauthier, 2003; Yin, 2004).

Several strategies were used to collect data: individual, semi-structured interviews with board chairs and key players in matters pertaining to gender and corporate boards and; group interviews with members of the governance and finance committees of the boards or their equivalent. An analysis of board-related documents was also performed. Two or three researchers were present during each of the interviews lasting approximately one hour. The saturation principle was applied, according to which the inclusion of more cases for data-collection purposes no longer provides new information that would justify increasing the empirical material (Pires, 1997). All interviews were recorded, and participants were guaranteed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential.

Altogether, 22 organisations were selected for participation (11 government corporations and 11 private corporations), for the most part large organisations as shown by their rankings. Seven of the private corporations and three government corporations ranked among the top 50 of Quebec’s 500 largest firms in 2014; one government corporation and two private corporations rank among the top 100; one government corporation and one private corporation rank among the top 200 (Les Affaires, http://www.lesaffaires.com/classements/les-500/liste). Therefore, 15 of the 22 organisations studied ranked among the 200 largest in the province of Quebec. Forty-two individuals were interviewed and had the following characteristics: 22 women (three chairs, 14 members, three CEOs, two experts in the field) and 20 men (12 chairs, one CEO, six members and one expert in the field). Table 2 presents more details about the sample.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software. Inductive analysis was used as a systematic procedure to process the qualitative data essentially guided by the research objectives. A detailed reading of the raw data resulted in the emergence of categories based on the researchers’ interpretations. Several categories were developed on the basis of the interview guide, while others emerged from the raw data and were integrated into the original frame of reference
Impact of the presence of women on public sector and private corporations (Huberman and Miles, 1991). As such, the inductive process included four distinct, yet iterative, steps – i.e., preparation of raw data; close, in-depth interpretation of interviews; identification and description of the first categories and; the revision and refining of all categories. Within each category, we looked for sub-categories, including opposing views and new perspectives. We also selected quotes and appropriate pieces of text that illustrate the essence of the category. To ensure the validity of the inductive analysis process, the research team used parallel blind coding and checked the clarity of categories. Data processing was based on the grounded theory (Paillé, 1994), since data grouping was performed in order to identify variables mentioned by respondents in the coding system according to the nature and frequency of each quote. The aim of the analysis was to highlight general findings regarding the impact of women on boards from a gendered perspective, while respecting the knowledge and perceptions of the participants as recommended by the standpoint theory (Hekman, 1997).

Table 2 Descriptive statistic on the sample

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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Types of sectors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M 45–54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairs</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
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4 Results

4.1 A nomination process based on the existing culture

The results show that the arrival of women on boards of directors ‘naturally’ or through the introduction of quotas must follow the standard nomination procedure. The nomination of a woman to the board of directors depends on the organisational culture existing within the corporation, namely the presence of women in senior management positions. A large number of respondents indicated that the chairman or chairwoman’s leadership was necessary to make things happen. Faced with these facts, the main challenges are related to continuity: “We carried out our mandate, we have 40% to 50% of women sitting on the board, but at the base, there has been no permanent change within the organisation... there might be a change of chair, and we could lose what has been gained because nothing has been integrated into the rest of the organisation” (woman, public organisation); “It’s resistance to change and not the fact that chairmen are against the idea of women sitting on the board; I don’t think that they believe that
women are less competent; it’s more about having the managerial courage” (man, public organisation).

Another key point raised by our respondents regarding the recruitment of women is the importance of the network. “If you want to get nominated somewhere, we have to know that you exist” (man, public organisation). Although the administrators encountered maintain that women have the competence to sit on boards of directors, they indicated that the networking is not there to allow them to promote themselves: “The only thing that works is the network. Of this I am absolutely sure. I am persuaded of the fact” (man, public sector organisation). Some administrators encountered explained that recruiting women is difficult because there are fewer women ready to sacrifice their evenings and attend cocktails and business meetings. “These are the classic networks that I, as a baby boomer, know. These days, networks of contacts are different because there is Facebook, etc., and things have changed” (man, public sector organisation). How does one exit the Old Boy’s Club and find women who are not in the usual recruiting circles? Different ideas were suggested, but they all converge: “If you ask a colleague on the board or a friend to suggest people to sit on the board, you are certain to receive four or five names and all will be men. If you say, by the way, I need some women, curiously, it will take a week or more and there may be only two names proposed” (man, private corporation). Our analysis led to this result: following the adoption of the Act respecting governance, people started to extend their network to recruit women on boards. Respondents confided honestly to us that prior to this new policy, female representation had never been a criterion in their recommendations. To gain access to the best possible candidates, people had to search outside the natural networks associated with the ‘Old Boy’s Club’. On this, an administrator declared:

“We started by amending our list of candidates; I believe that special efforts were made and other members collaborated with me. We called friends, sometimes outside our circle and asked them if they could suggest three or four candidates who might be interesting. Today, we have a list of some fifty interesting candidates. There was a time when, effectively, there were women on boards of directors, but often, they were the same seven or eight women who were found on several boards.” (man, private corporation)

Therefore, the Act on governance ‘forced’ the administrators of state-owned corporations to extend their natural network to increase the presence of women on boards. Although quotas are not mandatory for boards of publicly-traded companies, some respondents from these companies mentioned that recruiting women has had an impact on recruiting men: “Because we are demand so much of the women we accept — sometimes even more so than of the men. Therefore, the women who gain access to boards are damn good. However, this has contributed to increasing our level of expectations regarding men. Now we ask ourselves, what will Mr. X bring to our board?” (man, private corporation).

4.2 Feminine attributes

Results show a list of ‘feminine’ characteristics reported by male and female administrators consistent with the ‘gendered’ discourse. According to the respondents, the main differences between men and women are as follows: “Women are a little bit more exacting and also more tenacious sometimes. If an item is not settled to their satisfaction, they tend to return to it for as long as the situation fails to evolve. Men, in
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general, let go more quickly. Women are often less hesitant to express themselves”
(woman, public sector organisation). “They have different concerns regarding human
resources management” (man, public sector organisation); “They are more social and
more concerned about the individual and the effects of our decisions on people” (man,
public sector organisation).

One item on which all the participants agreed, both male and female, was that
“Women are much more analytical than the men” (man, public sector organisation). Although expressed differently by the respondents, women’s capacity for analysis is
sometimes perceived as positive, sometimes as negative. “A woman will have sized up
the situation and she will have two Plan Bs and three Plan Cs to cover all the bases. With
a man, things are sometimes more chaotic in terms of strategy and may lead to a wave of
panic to arrive at an end. These are the two leadership styles that I have observed. Female
leadership is more pragmatic, more down to earth and firmly grounded in reality (man,
public sector organisation). Another administrator indicated that “When women are
present, we are less prone to jump to conclusions and more inclined to proceed through
all steps of the analysis right down to the level of ethics (…); this leads to more fruitful
discussion” (man, private corporation). Women also stand out for their seriousness and
their preparation: “The man will say, I was… I didn’t have time. The woman will not say
that. She will find the time” (man, public sector organisation). “Women feel that they
have a mission to accomplish. They have a much better developed sense of public duty”
(woman, public sector organisation). However, some male administrators indicated that
this analytical capability weighs down the decision-making process and that “It surely has
the impact of being more taxing on the administration. Is the ultimate decision different?
I do not know, but the process leading up the decision is much longer” (man, public
sector organisation). Thus, there is an impact on the process underlying the review of a
file, but these few respondents were not sure if there was an impact on the final decision.
Several people also indicated that the ideas generally came from the women, but the
decisions were made by the men. Despite some negative views of the dynamics and
length of file analyses, the presence of women on boards of directors does not appear to
have a negative impact on the economic health of an organisation or on customer service.

“I do not think that there are differences in terms of the goals; it is clear that we
all want what is best for the organisation. But I would agree that a woman’s
approach goes beyond the next quarterly results. We gain a sense of continuity.
We consider more peripheral aspects that are very important in the decisional
process.” (woman, public sector organisation)

4.3 Competence is what counts, not gender

Our results indicate that the majority of participants whose discourse was founded on
competence had no negative opinions regarding the career paths of female administrators.
Other respondents simply added the following question: “Is the result different? I don’t
think so” (man, private corporation). Results show that it is more advantageous for
organisations to have people with specific expertise. The opinion of one administrator to
this effect is “We have a tendency to overestimate the value of the contribution of men
and women based on gender. I am of the school of thought that there are women who
think like men and men who think like women. What we want is expertise” (man, private
corporation). The main impact of having women on boards of directors is the expanded
pool of candidates. It is not solely the woman, but rather the combination of man-woman
that leads to better sources of talent. “When you seat people with different backgrounds and opinions around the same table, problems are examined from different angles (man, private corporation).

4.4 Give women a chance

According to the respondents, women will be nominated only if there is a need for female representativeness. One male respondent indicated: “I would not recommend someone based on their sex, but if a woman has all the skills required and there is a lack of female representation, I would tend to recommend the woman” (man, public-sector organisation). Likewise, another respondent confirmed: “Give her a chance because she has the competence required for the position. If I perceive an imbalance, I would tend to say that we should choose her” (man, private corporation). These remarks imply that a competent woman might gain access to a board of directors conditional, however, to the need for female representation. Accordingly, in the event that female representation were to be deemed ‘adequate’ and a male and female candidate were available, we might presume that the male candidate would be prioritised owing to the phenomenon of homosociality. Implicitly, this discourse suggests that men are nominated on the basis of their supposed competence, whereas the competence of women must be validated or tested.

In this respect, the respondents indicated to us that when there are fewer women, the dynamics are not the same. Indeed, to change an organisation’s culture, there must be a greater number of women. If not, “And if there is only one woman, she will probably align herself with the dominant culture in order to be able to take her place. In such a case, she resorts to imitation” (man, public sector organisation).

4.5 Diversity, rather than a regulatory approach

Achieving parity through the imposition of quotas has contributed to growing awareness of the concept of diversity. While some respondents are against the quotas: “In my opinion, rules and objectives lead to a slippery slope and we may not necessarily achieve the objectives targeted” (man, private corporation); others maintain that the public sector would not be where it is today without the legislation. “No, I do not believe in the natural ripple effect, nor do I believe in the achievement of parity within a reasonable time frame if there are no interventions whatsoever” (man, public sector organisation). The comments stemming from the positive and negative discourse regarding the imposition of quotas refer to the concepts of diversity and positive discrimination.

First, diversity reduced to gender² is presented as a step to achieve. In this respect, one administrator stated: “I think that the male-female concept means that we must move in stages; we have to be more egalitarian for certain segments of the population; after that, we must integrate the other segment of the population to be more egalitarian” (man, private corporation). Therefore, according to this respondent, to consider diversity positively, it should not be viewed as a progressive concept, but rather as a change of mindset that promotes the advantages of diversity.

Secondly, the notion of diversity should not be considered as a simple objective to achieve. Diversity should be viewed as the possibility of seeking out the best possible talent available in the population at large. From this perceptive, one administrator mentioned the existence of a risk: “These fundamental changes risk backfiring with a
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regulated and targeted approach where people may think that once the objective has been achieved, they will leave us alone. This brings me back to my starting point: women have just as much place on a board as men. So it’s not just about trying to please women that there should be 50%” (man, private corporation). More broadly speaking, if one considers the notion of diversity, one has to move beyond the concept of representation implied in the legislation through quotas and percentages. Diversity must be viewed from the perspective of improving quality, and an openness to a greater pool of talent. When positive discrimination towards women is raised, some administrators indicate the existence of resistance in the form of: “Are we embracing reverse discrimination? Are we choosing a person for the wrong reasons? Will the end result be a better team?” (man, private corporation). “Therefore, diversity, contrary to the quota, is also about asking oneself ‘Where are the better women? Who are they? Where are the best persons of different ethnic origin? Who are the people who would bring the most to our organisation? Is our board over-represented by a certain age group?’ Because, in addition to male-female diversity, these are also issues noted on boards of directors” (woman, public sector organisation).

Some participants mentioned that a company has a responsibility at the social level. To play its role, an organisation must have a diversified board of directors representative of society. “Half of society is made up of women, and they must be involved in decisions, in positions at all levels of power, etc. There must be an element of coercion so that women are not overlooked” (man, public sector organisation). Consequently, organisations, chairs and directors on boards of directors must establish incentives, set up models and take risks to find the positive leverage that will help them locate the talent that they need. Additionally, and to go a bit further regarding the presence of women on boards, one administrator highlighted the fact that women are more attuned to the social responsibility of a company or organisation. “They are not there for their own interests. Indeed, I have seen women make decisions that appeared contrary to their interests in the name of greater interests; I have never seen a man do that” (woman, public sector organisation). We believe this to be a major change of mentality and culture within organisations and societies. For some, the presence of women provides a refreshing complementarity of points of view to the board of directors. “There is no woman there because she is a woman” (man, public sector organisation). For companies with a largely female clientele, it is important that feminine viewpoints be present on the board. “In my case, of course, it is important. Now, if I were with a company that manufactured airplane parts, it would be less important” (man, private corporation). The presence of women becomes a question of social representation.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study was to document elements related to the perceived impact of the presence of women on boardroom through board members’ discourses and board practices. The purpose of the research question was to determine whether the significant presence of women on boards has an impact and contributes to modify and establish new gendered social relationships in board processes and practices or, if once in place, women basically comply with the existing discourses and practices, thereby perpetuating the androcentric and model?
The results show that the two types of discourse mentioned in the literature – competence and individual gendered – are present among board members in Quebec. The results also reveal the presence of a discourse on diversity distinct from the other two. Since this study is qualitative and our analysis focused on the substance of the comments made, coding frequencies related to the quotes were compiled based on the three categories of discourse to obtain additional indications regarding the importance of each. Figure 1 shows that discourse on competence is relatively present, while individual gendered discourse is less present among our respondents. The discourse on diversity contains the most quotes.

Figure 1  Coding frequency based on the type of discourse

A specific analysis of these three types of discourse allowed us to determine their impact on the dynamics of boards of directors and what they can lead to in terms of change.

No significant impact of the presence of women: discourse on competence or the negation of change

A first contribution of this study is that most of the respondents have no opinion on the subject or see no significant impact due to the presence of women on boards. To speak of change, respondents would have to acknowledge the presence of women as distinctive and that their presence accounts for a difference in how boards operate, which is not the case here. Board members seem happy to maintain a neutral position without questioning ways of doing things, observing the complexity of the analyses, openly questioning persisting inequities, understanding the new gendered social relationships or developing new approaches within these traditional centres of power.
The results show that it is not the fact of being a woman or a man that counts, but rather competence as found in the literature (Pesonen et al., 2009). Although the administrators recognise that the advent of women provides access to a larger pool of candidates and that women today have the competences required to sit on boards, these competences continue to be presumed to be masculine and, therefore, are often immediately questioned (Tienari et al., 2009). In all cases, the qualities sought among the women appear to be similar to those of male administrators. Moreover, the results show that when women are deemed competent, they would appear to receive preferential treatment or be given a chance as a result of the need for representativeness. This inevitably reinforces the phenomenon of homosociality and the fact that women’s competences must be validated.

The significant impact of the presence of women: the individual gendered discourse or changes that reinforce stereotypes

A second contribution of this study is that respondents perceive the significant impact that women have on boards of administration owing to their ‘feminine’ qualities. Our respondents highlight the input from women as a distinct asset. The results allowed us to list ‘feminine’ characteristics (thoroughness, perseverance, analysis, etc.) aligned with the individual gendered discourse (Adam and Funk, 2012; Bart and McQueen, 2013; Pesonen et al., 2009). Female leadership is described as pragmatic and women stand out for their seriousness, thoroughness, file preparation and a heightened sense of public duty. Like other studies, the results show that the social and moral development of women has a positive impact on boardroom dynamics (Bernardi et al., 2006; Lamsa and Sintone, 2001; Tremblay et al., 2016). Respondents agree that this would change group dynamics, as indicated previously in several studies.

The discourse on female attributes makes the phenomenon hard to understand, since this distinct capacity is sometimes perceived by the respondents as positive and sometimes negative. Consequently, women’s contribution is sometimes overestimated or ascribed as behaviour based solely on sex. This also leads some respondents to state that “Some women think like men and some men think like women”. Rather than shedding light on the nature of changes in board dynamics, this type of discourse seems to reinforce the stereotypes and lead to all kinds of questionable hypotheses such as “The ideas generally come from the women, but the decisions are made by the men” and that the presence of women on boards of directors does not appear to have a negative impact on the economic health of an organisation or on customer service. Why does this type of discourse lead us to question whether female attributes might have negative effects? Although resorted to less frequently, it would appear that this discourse gives rise to certain deviations that point in every direction, rather than the integrated co-construction of new practices and new relational dynamics within boards of directors.

This perception, which makes it impossible to identify any possible impact of the presence of women or of gender diversity, may not provide an answer to the initial research question. However, since this discourse is not shared by the largest number of respondents, another discourse more widely shared on diversity provides the underpinning for a greater in-depth analysis of behavioural changes that may be observed.
The significant impact of a male/female mix: Is the discourse on diversity a catalyst for real change?

A third contribution of this study is to highlight the presence of a discourse on diversity that attaches importance to the significant impact of mixing men and women. Rather than denying what women contribute or banking on their specific attributes, the respondents view the presence of women on boards of directors as providing opinions complementary to those of men. When many women are represent, this complementarity leads to new dynamics.

This discourse is perceived as more inclusive and a catalyst for change in a context where discussions concern the imposition of the presence of women through various means of positive discrimination. The results show that the presence of women is a major factor of this diversity that gradually undermines resistance to change and modifies organisational culture. This change of culture within boards is a necessary reaction to the current dominant culture and helps mitigate imitation. It highlights the importance of critical mass as indicated in the literature, namely that a true change of culture takes place when there are three or more women on a board (Erkut et al., 2008; Joecks et al., 2012; Kanter, 1977; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011; Holgersson, 2013; Tremblay et al., 2016).

This diversity also represents the possibility of seeking out the best possible talent within the population and promotes an organisation’s social responsibility. The discourse also draws attention to the fact of having women on boards definitely addresses the question of gender relations and inequities within boards. Findings indicate that some board chairs address dimensions linked to a renewed decision-making process and the creation of a new organisational environment. According to some administrators, it is not the women who bring about this social responsibility solely through this individual attribute (Bilimoria, 2000; Brown et al., 2002; Galbreath, 2011; Perrault, 2015), but the fact that women’s involvement and diversity management are part of an organisation’s philosophy and practices.

The in-depth changes sought by this discourse are particularly interesting and appealing in the context of this study because they acknowledge both the significant impact of the presence of women and the fact that this presence, combined with that of the men, prompts something different within the boards. This discourse, which is embraced most by our respondents, also leads to a concern regarding intersectionality (age, ethnic origin, etc.).

However, in this study, it was not possible to precisely isolate the nature the changes advocated in the respondents’ discourse. It was very difficult for the majority of respondents, both men and women, to observe tangible changes within boards, whether in terms of the process or at the cultural, relational, and intersectionality levels, etc.

In fact, very few boards communicate information regarding female representation when they appoint senior management members. Upon a closer look at the initiatives mentioned by respondents and those formally communicated in the corporations’ written documentation (annual report, circulars, Website, etc.), only 10% of these corporations indicate that they have adopted a gender diversity management policy (Bédard and Brière, 2015). Furthermore, the evolution of the representation of women in senior positions in the 60 Quebecers’ largest listed companies in Quebec from 2010 to 2013 shows that the percentage is stable over the period, ranging between 16.3% and 17.5%. Thus, although the respondents on boards expend considerable effort to name more
women based on a competence checklist, the results show that the nomination process continues to depend much more on the personality and goodwill of the chairs in place.

From this perspective, more administrators, men and women, were unable to clearly show concrete changes and provide in-depth answers to these questions: What are the various roles and relationships between members? What are the new decision-making processes actually implemented? What changes have been made to organisational processes? How are new concerns from members and society taken into account by the board? What are the board’s new performance criteria with respect to member representativeness? Has a new form of critical thinking emerged within the organisation? What is the real implication of the concept of diversity and inclusion? It is clear that we have only reached the tip of members’ intentions.

Reframing the impact of women on boards of directors as an organisational gendering process

This study highlights the relevance of examining the presence and impact of women on boards from a new angle with a perspective that goes beyond statistical data and multiple discourses. Different approaches are needed to better document what a real gendering board might be. A new analysis might help further the search for theoretical and organisational solutions in a context where even legal enforcement has little tangible impact on the organisation beyond the targeted quantitative goals (Bertrand et al., 2014). The approach suggested involves a search to better understand the reality and needs of boards, given that their directors do not form homogeneous groups and that the diversity existing within these groups must be taken into account and analysed. For this purpose, it would be very helpful to resort to case studies to develop and better document practices that use an approach that is multidisciplinary, collective, gender-sensitive and incorporates the intersectional analysis framework. Given this context, it might prove interesting to better identify whether the positive attitude regarding the presence of women and the discourse on diversity will, in time, bring about tangible changes in behaviour (Fointiat and Barbier, 2015).

In the future, it might also be relevant to study the possible differences of discourse between men and women, and public and private firms, to discern any specific changes by sex or sectors. In order to compare results, the completion of the same survey with firms having few women on their boards could be also a good way to learn more about practices on boards of directors, on the condition that the boards in question agree to participate to this survey. This approach is unquestionably more complex for practitioners and researchers because there is no template. However, it could certainly lead to documenting real change related to the presence of women on boards of directors.

References


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**Notes**

1Bill 59 is an Act respecting the governance of state-owned enterprises – This law set a gender parity target for the boards of directors of 21 government enterprises to be reached by November 2011 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2006). However, this law does not apply to private corporations.

2In another context, the administrator also referred to diversity in a much more positive light speaking not only about gender, but also ethnic origin, generational aspects and the aspect of diversity of competences.

**Website**