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Female top leaders – prisoners of gender? The gendering of leadership discourses in Norwegian sports organizations

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Female leadership is scarce in sport as well as in most other male dominated institutions. The research body on leadership indicates general leadership skills often associated with 'heroic' masculine traits, but are seen and treated as gender neutral. This article highlights dominant leadership discourses in sport organizations and focuses, in particular, on the conceptualization of female leadership, and the ways in which these construct female leadership and gender as a difference and power relation. The analyses are empirically grounded in a study, which focus on the gendering of sport leadership. The data material consists of qualitative interviews of executive board members in Norwegian sports federations. The theoretical framework includes approaches employed in feminist leadership research, in neo-liberal leadership research as well as in the body of gender equality research. The analyses conclude that certain forms of masculinity and stereotyped notions of gender are an integral part of the dominant leadership discourses in sport organizations. Because dominant leadership discourses are rooted in conceptualizations of female gender as making the gender difference, gender as a power relation is hidden or blurred, with the consequence that dominant leadership discourses make women 'prisoners' of gender.

Keywords: female leadership; Norwegian sport federations; interviews; androcentrism; gender stereotypes

如同其他大部分的機構一樣，女性主管在運動領域裡的比例是非常少的。針對主管的研究顯示，一般的領導技能常跟「英勇的」男子氣概特質有關，但卻被視為是性別中立的。本文主要探討運動組織中主流的領導論述，並特別將焦點放在女性領導的概念化，以及這些論述建構女性領導和性別為一種區別性及權力關係的方式。本研究分析是聚焦於運動領導者的性別化議題上。資料的蒐集是採用質性訪談的方式，受訪對象是挪威運動組織裡的執委會成員。本研究採用的理論架構包括女性領導理論、新自由主義領導理論以及性別平等理論等。研究結果顯示，某些型態的男子氣概及性別的刻板印象成為運動組織中，主流領導論述裡不可或缺的一部份。其原因是主流的領導論述深植於女性性別的概念化中，造成性別權力的差異，且這種權力關係是隱晦不明或難以察覺的。最後，主流的領導論述，導致婦女成為性別的囚犯。

關鍵詞：女性領導；挪威運動聯合會；訪談；男性中心主義；性別刻板印象

スポーツそして男性が独占的な組織では、女性のリーダーシップはほんの一握りにすぎない。リーダーシップについての研究では、一般的なリーダーシップのスキルは「英雄的」な男性的特性と関連付けられるが、ジェンダー的には中立的であると見られ、そのように扱われるとしている。本稿では、スポーツ組織におけるリーダーシップに関する代表的な言説、特に、女性のリーダーシップの概念化、そしてそのような概念が女性のリーダ

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リーダーシップやジェンダーを違うものとして、また力関係なものとしていかに構築されているか、といった点に焦点を当てる。本研究では、スポーツリーダーシップのジェンダー化に着目した事例研究に基き分析を展開する。ここでは、ノルウェーのスポーツ組織の理事会委員への質的なインタビューを用いている。理論的な枠組みとしては、フェミニストリーダーシップ研究、ネオリベラルリーダーシップ研究、そしてジェンダー平等の研究に用いられているアプローチが含まれている。分析の結果、スポーツ組織における支配的なリーダーシップの言説には、ある一定の男性的な形式とジェンダーについての固定概念が内在することが分かった。その支配的なリーダーシップに関する言説は、ジェンダーを違うものとする女性のジェンダーの概念化に深く根付いているため、力関係としてのジェンダーは隠れもしくは薄められていくといえる。その結果、支配的なリーダーシップの言説は、女性をジェンダーの「囚人」たらしめているといえる。

キーワード:女性リーダーシップ; ノルウェーのスポーツ連盟; インタビュー; 男性中心主義; ジェンダー ステレオタイプ

Introduction

In sports organizations as well as in other powerful societal institutions, female leadership is scarce. Over recent decades several political initiatives that aim at establishing more gender-balanced leadership structures in sports have been taken, for example, among the UN and IOC, but women in the top leadership positions are still spectacular exceptions (see Hartmann-Tews and Pfister 2003). In Scandinavian countries, which have the lowest gender gap in most social fields (Hausmann *et al.* 2006), studies still indicate that highly educated middle-aged men, in full-time employment, in high income brackets and with more organizational experience than the average member (e.g. Ibsen 1996, Hovden 2006, Pfister 2006) still hold most of the top positions. But why does the existing gender structure with respect to leading positions appear to be so persistent? Why is it so difficult for women to make it to the top? This article discusses these issues.

The article will identify and analyse some dominant leadership discourses in Norwegian sports organizations by focusing, in particular, on conceptualizations of female leadership and the ways in which these construct female leadership and gender as a power relation. More concretely, I will: 1) identify some dominant leadership discourses and show how women are perceived as leaders according to dominant leadership ideals; 2) discuss ways in which female leaders are assumed to make a difference to leadership; and 3) indicate how images of female leadership construct gender and the assumed consequences of this construction. My analysis is empirically grounded in a study in which I conducted qualitative interviews with influential leaders in Norwegian sports organizations regarding their views on leadership and gender dynamics in sports organizations. The theoretical framework consists mostly of contributions from neo-liberal leadership research as well as the feminist critique of this body of research. The article concludes with some reflections on how constructions of gender in dominant leadership discourses may limit or stimulate gender-balanced leadership realities in sport. I will first contextualize and situate my analysis by giving a brief introduction of some of the features of the politics of gender that characterize Norwegian society as well as Norwegian sports.

Norwegian gender policy and the gendering of sport

Norway is seen around the world as a champion of gender equality policies. In the Gender Gap Report (Hausmann *et al.* 2006), Norway is ranked as the second equal out of 115

countries. This status is among other factors a result of 40 years of political focus on gender issues in public policies. As early as 1978 the Norwegian Parliament passed a Gender Equality Act, which went into force in 1979. Norway was one of the first countries in the world to do so. The Act's goal was to improve the situation of women in education, work and cultural and professional development. In 1988 a provision was included in the Gender Equality Act requiring a 40% representation of both sexes on all public boards, councils and committees. One outcome of this gender quota regulation is that no government has been formed in Norway since, whether social democratic, conservative or centre, with less than 40% female members. Gender quotas have thus proved to be an effective means of achieving a more equal distribution of women and men in politics as well as in public boards and committees (Skjeie and Teigen 2003, Teigen and Wagnerud 2009). On the other hand, in Norway, as elsewhere, we find big discrepancies between political statements, objectives and political realities. Research (e.g. Skjeie and Teigen 2003) on how power is distributed within powerful Norwegian institutions, shows that men possess on average 84% of the very highest positions. The distribution within sports organizations confirms in most respects this situation (see Fasting and Sand 2009). Kvande (1998, 2007) has labelled this the Norwegian paradox: while women have increased their participation in the work force, in politics and in sports, the representation of women in the top positions in working life as well as in sport organizations is almost unchanged.

The organized sports system in Norway consists of voluntary organizations that belong to an umbrella organization, the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (the NOC). The NOC is the biggest voluntary organization in Norway with a membership of about 2 million out of a total population of 4.8 million. Women make up about 40% of the membership. A recent investigation (Fasting and Sand 2009) of the status of women in Norwegian sport organization shows that women possess only about 17% of the leading political positions and only about 8% of the leading coaching positions. Most female leadership is found on lower levels, in children's and youth sports (Enjolras *et al.* 2005, Karlsen 1995). In other words, in Norway, as in organized sports in most other countries, the proportion of women decreases as power and prestige increase (Claringbould 2008, Hartmann-Tews and Pfister 2003).

The gender quota system passed in the NOCs in 1987, which requires a minimum representation of both genders in all organizational decision-making bodies, has contributed to a significant improvement of gender representation in sports policy over the last two decades.¹ The gender quota system has resulted in a gradual increase in the representation of female board and committee members at all organizational levels. Today women hold 37% of the board member positions in national sports federations (Fasting and Sand 2009). On the other hand, the gender quota law has not brought more women into presidential or top leadership positions in sports federations and clubs to the same extent (Hovden 2006, Fasting and Sand 2009). A study of local sports clubs (Enjolras *et al.* 2005) found that 22% of these clubs have no women at all on their executive boards. In other words, many organizational bodies do not practise the gender quota law. Few sanctions have been taken against these practices. This suggests that the politics and management of Norwegian sports are in most respects shaped by gender hierarchies.

In recent years we find a growing body of research examining gendered leadership patterns in European sport organizations (e.g. Claringbould and Knoppers 2008, Doll-Tepper *et al.* 2005, Fasting and Sand 2009, Habermann *et al.* 2005, Hovden 2006, Pfister 2006). Most of these studies are empirically embedded and highlight patterns of gender distributions in sports leadership, characteristics of male and female leaders and their attitudes and explanations regarding the existing gender hierarchies in sports leadership.

The issues raised in this paper are, however, more closely related to the theoretical orientation taken. In the further outlining of my theoretical framework I will indicate how my analyses are directed by a few core theoretical concepts and models.

Theoretical framework

The neo-liberalist wave at the end of the 1980s led to a restructuring of organizations and leadership, moving them closer to models of corporate managerialism. This ideological shift caused a renewed and strengthened focus on leaders and leadership² (e.g. Alvesson and Billing 1997, Halford *et al.* 1997, Johannessen 1994, Kerfoot and Knights 1993, Sørhaug 1992). In the 1990–1994 period, for example, 5341 articles on leadership were published in Anglo-American journals (Grint 1995). The new research perspectives reflected, among other factors, the reification of leaders as ‘heroic’ subjects and ‘great men’ and images of leadership causally related to organizational performance (e.g. Calas and Smircich 1991, Johannessen 1994, Meindl 1990, Sørhaug 2004). Leadership was seen as an essential route to organizational success and was presented as something that happens among men, even though all models and concepts were presented in gender neutral terms (Sørhaug 2004). Solheim (2002) maintains, however, that the gender blindness of this body of research is paradoxical; its apparent gender neutrality implies notions of a dominating and hegemonic gender.

The new liberal leader ideal has been characterized by several feminist scholars (e.g. Brandser 1996, Calas and Smircich 1991, Halford *et al.* 1997, Johannessen 1994, Martin 1996, Staunes and Søndergaard 2006) as one of the ‘heroic male’; a potent action- and task-oriented person with an ethos of competitiveness, specialist skills and dedication. Studies on gender and leadership in sports organizations have identified similar leadership conceptualizations (e.g. Hovden 2000b, Pfister 2006, Slack 1997).

The feminist body of research on leadership and gender in organizations (e.g. Acker 1990, 1992, Alvesson and Billing 1997, Calas and Smircich 1991, Gøranson 2007, Kvande and Rasmussen 1990, 1994, Staunes and Søndergaard 2006) shows both multilayered and partly contradictory scholarly discourses about female leadership and how to create more gender-balanced leadership structures. For example, issues of how women as a group may represent certain leadership skills and thus make a difference to leadership are controversial and constitute contested terrain. In other words in the field of feminist leadership studies, gender seems to be a concept in the ‘making’ that both reflects and constitutes various approaches to leadership (Calas and Smircich 1996). In the body of sports research, there are few feminist studies that shed light on power dynamics and the gendering of sports leadership, for example, how images of female leadership are constructed and reflect gendered power relations (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007, Hovden 2006, Pfister 2006).

The central concern in this article is to identify conceptualizations of female leadership and gender in dominant leadership discourses and how they reflect gendered power relations. The analysis will thus contain critical reflections that go beyond the prevalent discourse on leadership and gender to suggest how the images conveyed become ambiguous and contradictory as a result of different assumptions and modes of interpretation of gender. To provide a theoretical framing fruitful for such analyses, I have chosen to emphasize two dominant and dualistic leadership discourses, which I call ‘androcentric’ and ‘gynocentric’ leadership discourses. To have the main focus on only two dominant dualistic leadership models, can be seen as an oversimplification that may not grasp more complex images on female leadership. One main purpose of this study is to identify dominant constructions of gender underlying reported leadership ideals and images of female leadership. Gynocentric

and androcentric leadership discourses are, according to Brandser (1996), most often actualized when female leadership is framed. Both discourses are explicitly and implicitly embedded in the dominant symbolic construction of gender as a relation of difference. Haavind (1994) conceptualizes this construction as a cultural code, in which gender is underpinned by a split that categorizes masculinity and femininity and masculine and feminine as mutually incompatible and in which femininity is framed as subordinated to masculinity in that the masculine is treated as the general, the natural and the superior. Johannessen (1994) has argued that this approach opens up the possibility of unmasking gendered power relations and enables an understanding of how the gendering of leadership images are constructed and how dualistic categories like men and women and masculinity and femininity function and acquire meaning. With this as a backdrop I will next briefly outline and discuss some central features characterizing 'androcentric'³ and gynocentric leadership discourses.

Nowadays neo-liberal leadership ideals, based on issues, concepts and theories to satisfy the needs of leaders for more efficient and profitable organizations, can mainly be identified as androcentric leadership ideals (e.g. Johannessen 1994, Kerfoot and Knights 1993, Staunes and Søndergaard 2006). Such ideals imply a reification of leaders as heroic subjects and reflect images of organizations as action-oriented systems controlled by potent, competitive and rational leaders. Leadership skills are seen as individual and gender neutral and, according to gender-sensitive leadership analyses, reflect features of heroic or hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Alvesson and Billing 1997, Brandser 1996, Johannessen 1994, Sørhaug 1992, 2004). Sørhaug (2004) maintains that the dominant leadership ideals described in the body of management and leadership research are shaped by androcentric biases. Leadership practices are conceptualized as 'things between men' and reflect a picture of the potent male hero with traits such as independence, ambition, high self-confidence, achievement-orientation, decisiveness and courage. Such traits and skills are further described as necessary as well as desirable individual leadership qualifications (e.g. Dahler 1988, Johannessen 1994, Strand 2001). The underlying suggestion is that both men and women occupy leadership positions by virtue of their professional and personal qualifications alone. Gender does not matter.

Feminist critics of androcentric leadership discourses (e.g. Calas and Smircich 1996, Hovden 2000b, Johannessen 1994, Kvande and Rasmussen 1994) maintain that even critical research on leadership directs little or no attention to the masculinity implicit in the dominant leadership ideals. Thus the public figures, who fit into seemingly gender neutral leadership ideals, are men, and men with masculine and heroic skills. The relationship between masculinity and power is thus naturalized and blurred (Hovden 2000b). The body of leadership research elevates men's attributions of power; instrumentality, competitiveness, certain forms of rationality and independence to attractive leadership traits or necessary leadership skills (Dahler 1988).

My analyses will identify and discuss how female leadership images are conceptualized and constructed according to androcentric leadership discourses, for example, if and in which ways they mirror androcentric lopsidedness. Will for instance female sport leaders be assessed as 'lacking /deviant males' rather than representing an equalized alternative? Conceptualizing female leadership skills as a positive difference to the dominant androcentric model may on the other hand mean drawing upon perceptions of leadership shaped by gynocentric or women-centred leadership discourses. 'Gynocentric' leadership discourses were developed by cultural feminist scholars from the middle of the 1980s and can be seen as a reaction to androcentric images of leadership (Brandser 1996).

Gynocentric leadership discourses are mainly based on the ideology that female leaders have the ability to make a valuable contribution to leadership by drawing upon different inherent leadership skills; female leadership skills are in most respects seen as complementary to androcentric images (Brandser 1996). In gynocentric, or women-centred, discourses women are no longer seen as the 'weak sex'; a category that must be supported, trained and counselled to acquire sufficiently appropriate leadership skills, but rather as the 'second sex', a category possessing special skills that are understood to be needed and valuable resources in leadership and in organizations (Johannessen 1994). Women are assessed as an underutilized and particular resource group in leadership and organizations. Arguments linked to democratic principles and gender justice are however, mostly downplayed. Within these discourses we can trace an emergence of a new set of issues focusing on what type of contribution women as an underutilized leadership resource may add to dominant leadership styles and practices (e.g. Loden 1985, Rosener 1990). Gynocentric discourses can thus be seen as both a reaction to the ideology of neutralizing the effects of gender to leadership as well as a protest against expert advice that encourages women to be more strategic, self-confident and willing to adapt to dominant androcentric ideals (Brandser 1996). The feminine difference is associated with essential feminine skills such as women's special competence for caring and empathy, women's special capacity for relational communication, team-building and co-operation and women's emphasis on building human relations and confidence as an integral part of leadership practices (e.g. Drake and Solberg 1995, Loden 1985, Rosener 1990). The gynocentric ideal appears as shaped by connotations of stereotyped or naturalized femininity and a belief that women as representatives of the female gender can add specific feminine contributions to leadership. Moreover, it is not clear whether, in this view, women acquire their special feminine attributes through their gendered socialization or if such skills are essentially rooted in biology. In addition, how gender is constructed as a power relation in this discourse is mostly blurred (Brandser 1996).

Critical studies of leadership (e.g. Johannessen 1994, Sørhaug 2004) have criticized gynocentric leadership discourses using many of the same criteria that feminists have applied to androcentric discourses. They maintain that the celebration of gynocentric leadership skills ends up restating a heroic view of female leadership that is similar to that found in the androcentric ideal, for example the notions of leadership as mainly a set of positive individual skills. The critics maintain that there is no such thing as essentially feminine skills that all women share and inherit independent of cultural context and inequalities related to class, ethnicity and race (Calas and Smircich 1996). Gynocentric leadership images imply that female leaders will face the burden of behaving essentially differently from men and thus make a positive difference to leadership. According to Johannessen (1994) institutional meanings of gender and gender as a power relationship are only marginally reflected and discussed in women-centred leadership discourses.

In my further analysis I attempt to identify and discuss how dominant leadership discourses in sport organizations are shaped by androcentric and gynocentric leadership discourses; for example, in which ways images of female leadership are described as a gender difference, and further if and how the difference stated is embedded in a codification of gender as a split, where femininity is framed as opposite and subordinated to masculinity. This codification reflects an understanding of gender as a power relation and represents an analytic point of departure with an emphasis on how gender as a power relationship is produced and reproduced and why it is so difficult for women to make it to the top. But before I move on to my analysis I will very briefly present the empirical study from which my data material derives.

The study: design and methods

The empirical material underpinning my analysis derives from a broader study examining the gender order and the gendering of power and leadership in Norwegian sports organizations (the NOCs).⁴ The study is based on in-depth interviews with male and female board members from the executive boards of some of the biggest Norwegian sports federations. The sports federations are national sports organizations and play a powerful role in sports politics in Norway. The executive boards of sports federations are elected at the General Assemblies and represent the highest decision-makers of the organizations. From this viewpoint executive board members can be seen as very influential sport leaders.

The main concern in this part of the study was to come closer to an understanding of the gendering of leadership structures. Thus the interviewees were selected strategically. The selection was based on the hypothesis that men and women holding positions at the highest level, but not being part of the presidency, would probably have the most valuable experience and knowledge that would yield the most relevant information about existing leadership discourses.⁵ In total I interviewed eight men and eight women from some of the biggest sports federations, and none of them were presidents or vice presidents of their boards. The selection ensured that representatives of different age groups were chosen. The boards were all headed by middle-aged male presidents, because this pattern represent the most typical in Norwegian sports federations.

An interview guide was used for support in the structuring of the interviews. The interview guide relevant for this part of the study was organized around three key themes: 1) experiences with respect to the gendering of sport leadership; 2) images of leadership and in particular female leadership; and 3) views of the ideal sport leader. The interviews were conducted during the spring 2004. Because of limited economic resources for the project, the interviews were conducted as phone interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded and each interview was summarized and transcribed. The interviewees were offered the opportunity to read the transcriptions, but none made use of this opportunity. The interviews were open-ended and lasted from 60 to 120 minutes and most of the interviewees showed high degree of engagement in the topic. I experienced, however, that the most experienced had more to say than the less experienced and, in particular, the most experienced women.

The age span of the interviewees was from 22 to 66 years and the women were, on average, younger (38 years) than their male counterparts (45 years). There were few distinct differences between men's and women's educational level. Almost all of them had higher education. All interviewees, except one, who was retired, possessed independent jobs and most of them had leadership responsibility connected to their jobs. Regarding leadership experience there were only small differences between men and women. Both women and men had a wide range of organizational experiences from former voluntary posts in the NOCs.

The analyses of the data material can be categorized as a form of critical discourse analyses. The understanding of discourse in this paper is mainly based on Foucault's (1977, 1980) and Fairclough's (2003) contributions viewing language as a form of institutionalized social practice, which shape our identities, relationships and systems of knowledge and beliefs. Dominant discourses are in line with this understanding, which means that discourses have power to interpret conditions, issues, and events in favour of the elite. Critical discourse analysis aims to make the voice of the marginalized legitimate and take the voice of the powerful into question to reveal hidden agendas that serve self-interests, maintain superiority, and ensure others' subjugation (Fairclough 2003). In other words, critical discourse analyses helps make clear the connections between use of language and the

exercise of power, which are my main concern in this study. The issues raised includes an examination of the connections between ideologies and power and how power operates by rules of exclusion and inclusions by making certain definitions and understanding of gender dominant and legitimate.

The issues raised in this paper are directed by the theoretical assumptions of the approach taken. The transcribed interview texts were systematically scheduled according to how they: 1) conceptualized and constructed images of leadership in accordance with androcentric and gynocentric leadership models; and 2) in accordance with how gender was codified as a difference. To identify this type of discursive elements is not straightforward, but rather complicated. They are connected to different contexts in time and place and shaped by the interviewees and the researchers' backgrounds, knowledge and power positions (Fairclough 2003) .

Another aspect that influences my interpretations in this paper is the quite rigorous theoretical and analytical lenses chosen. I have in my theoretical outlining argued for the relevance of this choice, but this framework represents several limitations. Approaching the data material from only two gendered leadership models will, for example, most likely blur inconsistencies as well as more multi-faceted approaches to the gendering of leadership among the interviewees. It is also quite obvious that the analytical lenses chosen are the most adequate to grasp how sport leadership, gender and power are reproduced. This point of entry is, for example, to a very little extent adequate in grasping processes of hybridization in the gendering of sport leadership. With these limitations as a backdrop I will move to my analysis.

Images of female leadership

The analysis will portray how the interviewees look at women leaders and in which ways androcentric and gynocentric leadership discourses and gender as difference are reflected in their views. I will first discuss expressions and attitudes that reflect androcentric leadership discourses.

When women make a negative difference to leadership

One of the main attitudes found among my interviewees was that female candidates most often had difficulty in competing with their male counterparts in terms of appropriate leadership skills for top leader positions. Women were seen as possessing fewer of the most preferred leadership skills. Interestingly, the analyses indicated that male and female board members most often explained women's lack of skills and abilities from different ideological positions. The female interviewees explained women's lack of skills and their reluctance to take on leadership roles as mainly the result of cultural and organizational factors, while most of their male counterparts linked women's problems to individual skills or attributes. However, three of the youngest male interviewees explained women's difficulties from both individual and cultural factors and indicated how male dominance may have negative effects on women's opportunities. These attitudes and differences are explored in more detail below.

The images of female leadership that draw in direct and indirect ways upon androcentric leadership discourses portrayed female leadership potential mainly as a negative difference. These images were roughly constructed by three types of arguments: 1) female leaders are more reluctant to make tough decisions; 2) female leaders are less ambitious and competitive; and 3) female leaders lack sufficient strategic competence and are not familiar enough

with the 'rules of the game'. Regarding the first type of argument both male and female interviewees maintained that female leaders seem to be less willing to take risks and show more reluctance when important or unpopular decisions must be taken. One of the male board members expressed his attitude in this way:

In my experience women are often more afraid of making mistakes . . . it seems like they . . . so to say . . . have to be more sure . . . and also need some more information before they take decisions.

Several of the female board members agreed that women are reluctant to make decisions, but framed the problem differently. They emphasized that women need more time because they represent a minority and their leadership is, therefore, often subjected to greater scrutiny. Several of the women stated that they felt that their leadership was more contested than was that of their male counterparts. Such views are in accordance with former studies in sport organizations (Hovden 1999) as well as Kanter's (1987) studies of women as minorities in work organizations.

The second type of argument was that female candidates demonstrate a lower level of ambition and less competitiveness in nomination and election processes for leader positions than do their male counterparts. Many of the male interviewees indicated, for example, that it seems like women do not like to compete with men on equal terms and try to avoid such situations. The female interviewees made similar statements, but did not look at this difference as an individual problem. Instead, they insisted that a female candidate in a male dominated organizational culture did not compete on equal terms. Many of them explained that men's hegemony in sports politics implied that cultural norms and codes affected men and women differently and thus led to unequal conditions and opportunities. As indicated a few of the youngest male interviewees shared this explanation. One of the most experienced females talked about the unequal power relations experienced in this way:

we women often express more emotions and frustration than men in most situations . . . that is . . . I think . . . because we are more critical and more often disagree with the premises on which many decisions are made. (. . .). But this behaviour does not necessarily mean . . . as men often think . . . that we cannot control our feelings.

Many arguments that emerged in the interviews were concerned with women's competence and whether they had enough experience to fill a top leadership position. It was mentioned that female leaders often showed neither the 'right' nor the necessary competence to hold such positions. One male board member characterized female top leaders as 'grey mice', because as he said, he had difficulty in seeing how they could contribute as top leaders. Another emphasized that women do not have the necessary tactical skills and insights into the 'rules of the game' to be trusted in such positions. He talked about women's problems in this way:

In my experience, many women are too open about their views and priorities at an early stage in the decision-making . . . I mean, that is not very smart . . . and it tells me that many women have too little political experiences at this level.

The female interviewees were also concerned about women's lack of experience, competence and ability to cope with the organizational decision-making, but explained these gender differences mainly as an organizational problem rather than a women's problem. Moreover, many of them stated that they felt they had to adapt and prove their qualifications

according to male expectations, while the competence of their male counterparts was most often taken for granted.

The reported images of female leadership with reference to androcentric leadership ideals indicate that women in leadership positions represent in most cases a negative difference according to dominant expectations, skills and norms. Women are considered to possess fewer of the most preferred individual leadership skills and are associated with and seen as a lag, that is, as a gendered category or as individuals of the 'other sex', who need more time, experience and personal resources to make it to the top. The most experienced female board members maintained, however, that this situation cannot be seen as a 'lag problem', but rather as a power problem; as result of unequal gender relations in sport leadership. This understanding corresponds with Bourdieu's (1999) analysis of relationships of domination, in which masculine standards are seen as general and gender neutral and female behaviour and competence are characterized as special, gendered and not appropriate. In other words, the male and female interviewees conceptualized images of female leadership as a negative difference quite similarly, but showed most often different interpretations of why women made a negative difference and could not make it to the top. But even though the empirical evidence of female leaders as making a negative difference was widespread both male and female interviewees also expressed alternative and positive visions of women's contribution to sports leadership.

When women make a positive difference to leadership

All interviewees emphasized that women can make a positive difference as top leaders in certain ways. The images reported reflected both complementary and alternatives leadership skills. Women's views and arguments stressed once again to a larger extent than their male counterparts that leadership skills must be seen in a contextual and relational perspective. Some of the main components and skills referred to were: 1) the ability of female leaders to show care and empathy; 2) female leaders' emphasis on democracy, team work and 'open agendas'; and 3) female leaders' ability to put new and controversial discussions on the political agenda.

Most interviewees emphasized female leaders' capacity to develop human relations by paying attention to the unique individual resources of their co-workers and by their concern for maintaining a good collaborative atmosphere in their environments. Female leaders were expected on the whole to show more care and empathy in their leader roles than their male counterparts. An experienced male board member talked about women's special leadership skills in this way:

I think women show other types of leadership skills than men. . . . I mean, in my experience they bring their female caring abilities . . . for example their concern for the well-being of others into the leader role . . . and this often contributes to a friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere . . . I have also noticed . . . it seems like women are not so focussed on positioning and competition.

Several of the female board members maintained that women's leadership approaches must be seen as a reaction to men's approaches. They stressed that women wanted in many respects to project alternative leadership images in which leaders were more open and inclusive and put a stronger emphasis on a democratic leadership style. One of the most experienced female respondents expressed it like this:

I view female leaders as more task-oriented than position-oriented . . . and we have agreed with each other that we want open agendas . . . all details 'on the table' and not all these hidden agendas . . . I mean . . . to be rewarded by prestige and power is not so important for us.

It was noticed that such attitudes do not necessarily mean that women are less strategic than their male counterparts, but rather the opposite. Several argued that because women must handle a decision-making situation defined by male norms, female leaders have to develop extensive strategic competence in their efforts to be influential and respected.

Other female contributions frequently mentioned were women's willingness to put new issues on the political agenda and their courage in initiating controversial discussions. Both male and female board members noted for example that discussions about gender equality and other controversial issues were most often initiated by women. One of the most experienced females stressed that discussing gender equality as a policy issue has not become easier over the last decade. She described the situation thus:

to argue for the relevance of discussing gender equality issues has been a fight every time and . . . for me . . . most often a lonely fight. It seems like it is still up to us women to bring these issues onto the agenda, I mean . . . my male colleagues show no engagement . . . it seems like they resist and disagree by remaining silent . . . And as I see it, the situation has become more difficult during the last years with no programme for the advancement of women in our strategic plans . . . nobody seems to care any more.

The positive images of female leadership identified seem in certain ways to be rooted in both gynocentric and androcentric leadership discourses. For example, women's special leadership skills associated with women's abilities for caring, relational communication and cooperation, mirror components from a gynocentric leadership ideal, in which women as a category seem to inherit certain traits associated with essential femininity (e.g. Grant 1988, Rosener 1990). On the other hand, the positive difference approach still reflects masculine norms and dominant leadership discourses as their frame of reference. My analyses seems to indicate that women's specific leadership potentials are implicitly negotiated from a dominant masculine ideal; the special female leadership skills mentioned mirror in most cases additional and valuable leadership skills rather than an alternative to the underlying general (androcentric) ideal. I will discuss this issue in the next section by looking more closely at how gender is constructed in the reported leadership discourses.

Women as a supplement and 'prisoners' of gender?

The images of female leadership drawn indicate how dominant leadership discourses in sports organizations are stratified by gender. The meanings and underlying notions of gender identified show that gender in most contexts is constructed as a difference as well as a dichotomy. Even though androcentric and gynocentric leadership discourses represent different situated approaches, they seem to be built on a common framing of gender. Gender appears in both discourses as a difference based on a dichotomized split, where female gender and femininity are constructed as the opposite of male gender and masculinity and furthermore seen as the particular and 'other gender', subordinate to the masculine gender, which is conceptualized as general and gender neutral. Thus, the gender split is constructed as a power relation and reflects the gender hierarchy (Haavind 1994, Johannessen 1994).

This construction obviously has several consequences as to how images of female leadership are constructed and for their potential to represent adequate alternatives to the

dominant, androcentric leadership ideal. First, the dominant leadership discourses identified reveal how female leadership images represent 'the gender difference'; the negative or positive difference in relation to the dominant (androcentric) ideal. Female leaders are mostly categorized as either lacking the skills or behaviour defined as desirable by the general norm, or as making a positive difference by adding some complementary and specific feminine skills to the dominant ideal. In other words, we can see how women in both situations become the signifiers and 'doers' of gender, and are thus reduced to a gender category and to the formula: 'gender = sex = woman = problem' (Brandser 1996). 'Male' as a gender category is made invisible and heroic forms of masculinity, built into the dominant leadership ideal, operate as the general, the most adequate and as gender neutral.

Second, the ideas of leadership skills underpinned by a construction of gender as a dichotomized split, in which masculinity and femininity are conceived as dichotomous individual attributes, make it possible to undermine cultural and institutional meanings of gender and thus to keep male dominance as an institutional power base invisible. As indicated in my empirical descriptions, more men than women constructed their images of female leadership according to this framing of gender. The most experienced women, who had obviously experienced the consequences of women's minority status as well as male dominance in sports leadership, explained the female difference mainly as the result of symbolic and institutional significances of gender. They commented, for example, on the link between masculinity and organizational power by referring to the challenges they faced regarding possibilities of defining and negotiating the gendering of the existing leadership realities.

Third, a construction of gender in which masculinities and femininities are interpreted as oppositional individual attributes of men and women, rather than as a social construction, opens the door to an understanding of men and women as inheriting essential gender specific skills that suggests that these are at least partially biological characteristics. In this study we can, for example, trace female leadership images in which female leaders are associated with certain naturalized gender specific traits. Such images reflect the notion that female leadership only can make a positive difference as long as the feminine is defined as different, subsidiary and subordinate to the dominant and masculine. The analysis demonstrates, for example, how ideas rooted in gynocentric leadership discourses may easily contribute to the reduction of the whole range of women's leadership potentials into a single individual category called 'the feminine'. From this point of departure scholars (e.g. Brandser 1996, Calas and Smircich 1996) have questioned whether women-centred leadership discourses based on an understanding of women as a difference, can generate more equalized leadership structures. It is argued that both gynocentric and androcentric leadership discourses make women 'prisoners' of gender (Brandser 1996). Because both androcentric and gynocentric discourses are rooted in conceptualizations of the female gender as making the gender difference, gender as a power relation is hidden or blurred. Analyses of gender in organizations (e.g. Acker 1990, Johannessen 1994, Kvande and Rasmussen 1994, Sørhaug 2004) have indicated how most of the leadership research remains gender blind, because leadership skills are treated as individual attributes rather than as gendered and contextual. But what alternative approaches might contribute to the disruption of this seemingly dominant gender order with respect to sport leadership and generate more democratic leadership realities? I will suggest a few potential alternative approaches in my concluding remarks.

Conclusion

The images of female leadership discussed indicate that certain forms of masculinity and stereotyped notions of gender are an integral part of the dominant leadership discourses. On the other hand, my empirical analyses also disclose how leadership discourses in sports organizations appear as a contested terrain, where contradictory and inconsistent meanings of gender are at play. The leadership images show, for example, how women are expected to have equal opportunities at the same time as they are seen as a gender category – a category lacking the preferred leadership skills, but inherent additional women-specific skills considered as making a positive difference as long as feminine is defined as subsidiary and complementary to the dominant androcentric ideal. Such images represent paradoxical and asymmetric representations of gender. But why are these gender representations so resistant?

From my analyses it seems quite obvious that male dominance in leadership and sports politics implies that men possess the power to define in which contexts and situations female gender should be conceptualized as a negative or as a positive difference. The data also indicate, in line with Bourdieu's (1999) analysis of male dominance, that it is in the interest of men to neutralize their power by, for example, not framing the implicit masculinity and androcentric biases explicitly. On the other hand, the empirical analyses disclose that the youngest male board members were more aware of the implicit discursive biases and how these influenced women's opportunities than their older male counterparts.

To more effectively challenge the gender hierarchy in sports leadership, it will be crucial to establish a political climate in which the underlying meanings of gender are openly discussed and framed, and thus become an important and integral part of all political and organizational discourses. Moreover, in this process men must be conceptualized as a gender category and as a signifier of gender on equal terms with women (Eduards 2002). This may include a continuous focus on gender as a relation of power. According to Bacchi (1999), it is only through political discussions of organizational meanings of gender that the master tools can be dissolved and all individuals made into gendered persons. To generate more gender-balanced leadership realities in sport, it is thus first and foremost necessary to transform men in leadership positions from naturalized heroic individuals and organizational symbols into gendered persons and a political category. The Swedish feminist scholar Maud Eduards (2002) has maintained that when men are visualized as gendered beings and a political category, they are simultaneously transformed from representing the universal norm into a specific 'something'; and are thus placed on equal footing with the female gender. The most important consequence of this transformation is according to Eduards (2002), that men are simultaneously pushed to take responsibility in terms of gender equality issues. She states that in the current gender political situation of the Scandinavian countries, naming men as men – as a political category and as an equal party in a power relation with women – is 'the most forbidden thing' (Eduards 2002, p. 157). It is quite obvious that if we are to fulfil the democratic norm towards gender balanced leadership structures in sports, we need new conceptualizations of gender in which conceptualizations of the 'most forbidden'; naming men as a gender category, must be an integral part.

Notes

1. As mentioned, the provision included in the Gender Equality Act that requiring 40% representation of both genders in all public boards, came in 1988 – one year after a gender quota was passed in the NOCCS. This indicates that the organized sports system in Norway was very early in implementing gender quotas in their decision-making bodies. One reason for this was the close relationship between women in sports and the women's movement. On the other hand,

- the socialist and social democratic political parties in Norway have had a radical gender quota with respect to their nomination process since the beginning of the 1980s: each nomination list is split 50-50 between the two genders.
2. The concepts 'leader' and 'leadership' will in this article refer to men and women in formal organizational power positions and to their stated skills and capacities.
 3. Androcentrism is a cultural value system which normalizes the male gender and masculinity as superior to the female gender and to femininity and that includes masculine principles, values and norms are relatively superior to what is categorized as feminine values, norms and principle. Because this value system is normalized, it is also taken for granted, naturalized and thus hidden as a masculine value system (e.g. Andresen 1996, Johannessen 1994).
 4. An article from the study focusing on the gender order in sport politics was published in 2006 titled 'The gender order as a policy issue in sport. A study of Norwegian sports organizations'. *NORA (Nordic Journal of Women's Studies)* 14 (1), 41–53.
 5. This hypothesis is based on my insights and experience from my former studies of gender relations in Norwegian sport organizations and in particular my study based on field work in the board room of national sport federations; participant observation of board meetings over a time period of two years (see Hovden 2000a).

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