

Power and Privilege, Meaning and Management – Gender in the Boardroom

The last “gender bastion” in Norway is the lack of women in innovation and economic life. Social scientist from Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU and Center for rural research will explore the fact that women are scarce in the board rooms of corporate life.

Norway and the other Nordic countries are internationally known to be a region with a high degree of equality between the sexes. However, despite this, there is a lack of women in management positions in the corporate sector. This is in many ways is the last bastion of the battle for gender equality in our country. Women are well represented in working life and they hold leading positions in politics. But, their presence in “higher” business management is rare.

The project consists of three related projects, all addressing this challenge from different perspectives; gender studies, rural studies and cultural studies. The researchers are posing questions about the implications of gender, sex and sexuality on decision-making in the context of recent legislative changes:

- Are cultural understandings of gender equality reproduced or changed by the implementation of the new Act?
- Is there a hegemonic culture of decision making, and if so: Will there be changes when more women enter the board rooms?
- How is the way women are performing their professional work and their relationship to their colleagues influenced by sexuality and eroticity?
- How does sexuality and eroticity affect women’s influence in their work places?

Power and Privilege, Meaning and Management - Gender in the Board Room is a cooperative scheme between Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU, Center for rural research and Department of sociology and political science, NTNU.

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Two PhD projects are part of the collaborate project, *Power and Privilege, Meaning and Management - Gender in the Board Room*:

Power and Eroticity in Management and Decision Making

The part this PhD project will play in the collaborate project is to explore the significance of sexuality and eroticity in the setting of the work place and boardroom. Using filmic representations as analytic material, the project aims to make visible, theorize and problematize that which often goes unspoken and seldom is taken into consideration when the politics of gender equality issues are being discussed; namely that of the erotic.

Could it be that sexuality and eroticity sets the 'ground rules' for what 'freedom of movement' female chairmen and women in board positions have? What part does the ever present possibility of sex and eroticism play in the negotiations of gender in films where management is performed? How are masculinity and femininity negotiated? What are the subject positions available to women in the context of management? Seen in the light of the erotic: are women and men tied together in the erotic dance not only in the bedroom and ballroom, but also in the office and boardroom? If so, how and with what implications for the decision making process?

The material for this PhD project will be filmic representations where women are in management and in leading positions. The material will be analyzed in the light of the erotic, asking what part the ever present possibility of sex and eroticism play in the negotiations of gender, this being in the context of topical and processual negotiations in a board meeting or other meetings where management is performed.

The understanding of the 'erotic' refers to anything that operates as a sign or symbol (words, clothes, body parts, motion, sounds, postures, etc.) that mediate a sense of- or interest in- bodily excitement and sensation between human beings. In the conduct of workplace meetings, this means analysing potentially diverse erotic aspects of the setting; physical as well as communication patterns, and the positioning of the characters in relation to each other.

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Women on board. Changing Balance – Changing Beliefs?

This project investigates the current Norwegian debate on gender representation in boardrooms. Through a focus on problem representations and gender norms, the conceptualisation of “gender equality” will be explored.

In December 2003 a clear all-party majority of the Norwegian Government passed legislation instructing publicly owned enterprises and publicly limited companies (PLC) to obtain a minimum of 40 percent of respectively men and women represented on their boards. A two years trial period were set to encourage the companies to meet the demand voluntarily. By the end of 2005 only 18 percent of the PLC's had achieved the goal that was set. This situation led to a growing focus on the recruitment of women as board members followed by a heated debate over required affirmative actions. Still, the percentage of female board members is rising at a slower speed than anticipated, and by mid 2007 only 57 percent of all PCLs fulfil the requirement.

Norway has relatively long traditions in regulating gender equality by law, but now also the business sector has, for the first time, been instructed to fulfil gender quotas. Parallel to this extension in gender equality regulation the concept of diversity has evolved and become central in the management discourse. This project deals with the intersection between the concept of diversity established in the corporate sector and the concept of gender equality and attempts to shed light on the contemporary development of gender balancing the boardrooms.

The analytical approach of the project will be discourse analysis with a focus on problem representations. The effects of competing problem understandings will be discussed and conditions within both formal and informal government will be explored. Political documents and debates, media texts, in-depth interviews and professional literature dealing with the subject of board composition will constitute the empirical material for analysis.

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