

A Qualitative Comparison of the Boardroom Experiences of U.S. and Norwegian Women Corporate Directors*

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ABSTRACT

In this article we compare the experiences of women members of the boards of directors of U.S. and Norwegian corporations. Based on the personal stories of two women directors from each country, we discuss similarities and differences in the role and characteristics of women corporate directors and the processes and behaviours they are involved in as directors within and outside the boardroom. We also investigate the role of gender-related board dynamics in these two countries, focusing on board roles and processes, and the visible and invisible board structures with which women corporate directors contend.

Research about corporate directorates in general has received significant attention during the last decade. The bulk of these studies, however, have paid little attention to actual board behaviour. Most studies use existing databases and investigate the relations between aspects of board composition and some measure of corporate performance, de-emphasising the relational dynamics inside and outside the boardroom (Johnson, Daily & Ellstrand, 1996; Pettigrew, 1992). Agency theory, the resource dependence perspective, and theories of corporate strategy are the most commonly used theoretical lenses (Johnson et al, 1996; Zahra & Pearce, 1989).

There are, however, some studies that attempt to open up the "black box" existing between inputs (board composition) and outputs (company performance) (Demb & Neubauer, 1992; Huse, 1995; Lorch, 1989). In this connection, the framework of Zahra and Pearce (1989) distinguishing between board attributes (composition, characteristics, structures and processes) and various board roles has received general recognition (Johnson et al, 1996). Despite these examples, not much empirical work is being undertaken to understand actual board dynamics and behaviour, and even fewer studies deal explicitly with the board experiences of women directors.

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While the number of empirical studies investigating women directors has increased somewhat since the early 1980s, few address the focal issue of improving the representation and status of women corporate directors. Drawing on an exhaustive review of the extant descriptive reporting of demographic information on women board members and the extant correlational analyses of issues pertinent to women directors, Bilimoria and Wheeler (1997) conclude that contemporary research about women directors has been lacking in sufficient quantity and rigour to generate the kinds of insights that can create an impetus for organisational change in the representation and status of women in corporate governance.

To address some of the shortcomings in existing knowledge about boardroom behaviours and relational dynamics, we explored the role of gender in understanding actual board behaviour, focusing on board roles, processes, and the visible and invisible boardroom structures governing women directors' behaviours. We thus sought to gain qualitative information about questions such as: What characteristics distinguish the women who are highly sought after for corporate directorships? What organisational benefits do women directors provide? What dynamics are present in boards having women members? What are the experiences of women directors with regard to gender-related board structures and practices? How do women directors behave inside and outside the boardroom? What characterises a woman-friendly board of directors? How can Chief Executive Officers (CEO) and board members increase their knowledge of the pool of women candidates for corporate directorships? What can women do to increase their visibility for corporate directorships?

To explore variations in cultural and institutional settings, we undertook a cross-cultural comparison. Since Norway is a country with a positive reputation for inclusion of women in top administrative and governmental offices, a comparison between the U.S. and Norway was thus considered to be interesting from an organisational change perspective. Before we delve into the personal stories of the status and experiences of the participants in our study, we first present summaries of the representation of women corporate directors in these two countries.

Women Directors in the U.S.

The past few years have yielded significant gains in the representation of women on corporate boards in the United States of America. Eighty one per cent of Fortune 500 firms had at least one woman director in 1995 (Catalyst, 1996; Fondas & Sasselos, 1996), up from 69 per cent in 1993 and around 50 per cent a decade ago.

Clearly there is widespread recognition that women members of corporate boards offer many contributions (Bilimoria, 1995; Fernandez, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Schwartz, 1980). By being more receptive to the contributions of women at the top, corporations can gain a competitive advantage to deal more effectively with diversity in their product and labour markets (Fernandez, 1993; Morrison, 1992). Additionally, female directors serve other corporate women in unique ways: serving as role models, mentors and champions for high-performing women in the organisation, and serving to keep issues of recruitment, retention and advancement of women high on the board's agenda (Burke, 1994; Ely, 1995; Schwartz, 1980). Since women directors tend to be younger than their male counterparts, boards also benefit from the infusion of new and different ideas (Burke, 1994; Ibrahim & Angelides, 1994).

Even though some would say that the battle for increasing women's representation on corporate boards in the U.S. is now largely over (Lear, 1994; Romano, 1993), it is obvious that the battle has not been won and that the current representation and status of women corporate directors leave much ground yet to gain (Bilimoria & Wheeler, 1997). Despite the increase in the number of companies having women directors, only about 10 per cent of the directors of *Fortune* 500 corporations are women (Catalyst, 1996). Additionally, two thirds of these largest corporations have no women or only one woman on their boards of directors (Catalyst, 1996), thereby furthering the likelihood of tokenised treatment of women. Thus there continues to be a gap between the expected impact of women directors and the number of women on corporate boards.

In this article, our objective is to address some of the questions raised by this gap, going beyond the numbers regarding women's increased representation in the past five years. Specifically, we explore details about the experiences of women on corporate boards, their personal characteristics and contributions to board practices, and the impacts of gender-related board structures and practices on their performance.

Women Directors in Norway

Two factors bring particular attention to Norway with respect to women in top leadership positions. First, more than 40 per cent of the members of Gro Harlem Brundtland's cabinet were women. In the mid-1990s, most of the chairpersons of the political parties in Norway were women. There are rules in Norway about representation of women in governmental and other public boards and positions, and at least 40 per cent of these positions must be filled with women. This rule is similar for government-owned corporations. The largest Norwegian state-owned corporations, such as Statoil, Statkraft (electric utility), NSB (railways) and Telenor (telecommunications), all have at least three women directors or 40 per cent of the directors on their boards.

Second, on the dimension of "feminine" versus "masculine" leadership (Hofstede, 1983), Scandinavian countries, including Norway, are rated as the countries with the most feminine leadership style. Managers in these countries emphasise traditionally feminine values, such as care and relationship orientation. However, these countries are not the countries with the highest proportion of female managers. In Sweden and Norway, the two most "feminine" countries on this dimension, women scored as more "masculine" than men did in the same occupations. Such findings challenge the traditional argument that "if only women were more like men" they would make better headway in management (Antal & Izraeli, 1993).

METHOD

To get information regarding the representation of women directors in Norway, we undertook a survey of all Norwegian firms quoted on the Oslo Stock Exchange. The results are presented in Table 1. For comparison purposes, we include in Table 1 statistics about the representation of women directors in the U.S. obtained by Frankforter, Phelps and Vollrath's (1995) study of a random selection of 600 quoted firms listed on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), American Stock Exchange (AMEX) and Over the Counter Stock Exchange (OTC) and by Catalyst's (1996) survey of *Fortune* 500 corporations (largely based in the U.S.).

Table 1 shows that, while the total numbers of board members remain about the same in both countries, the ratio of women on boards of directors in the firms quoted on the Oslo Stock Exchange is lower than in the sample of firms quoted on NYSE, AMEX and OTC, and lower than in Fortune 500 firms. Women directors appear to be even rarer in Norway than in the U.S. Thus, even though Norway has a high ratio of women in governmental boards and public administration/management positions, women are relatively rare on Norwegian corporate boards.

While these figures indicate an increase over time in the percentage of women directors in Norway, more detailed analysis of the Norwegian samples show that the percentage of women directors varies greatly by industry. The highest percentage of women directors is in banks, while the lowest is in shipping. Almost half of the women directors in 1996 were elected as employee representatives. A restructuring of the Norwegian banking industry took place between 1988 and 1992, leading to many mergers. These mergers are reflected in the figures presented in Table 1. Norwegian saving banks were introduced on the Oslo Stock Exchange after 1992. These had a high ratio of women directors, who were often elected as public representatives, appointed by local governments or as employee representatives. The percentage of female directors in Norwegian banks was 14.2 in 1996.

Table 1 The Representation of Women Directors in Norway and the U.S.

	Norway 1988 N=142	Norway 1992 N=114	Norway 1996 N=146	U.S. 1987 N=600 ^a	U.S. 1992 N=600 ^a	U.S. 1996 N=500 ^b
Average Number of Directors Per Board	6.37	6.70	6.76	6.34	5.85	
% Women Directors	4.01	3.40	7.49	6.05	8.26	10.2%
% of Women in Top Management		3	2	5-6 ^c		

^aFrom Frankforter, Phelps & Vollrath (1995)

^bFrom Catalyst (1997)

^cFrom Adams (1993)

The Stories of Four Women Directors

In this section we present summaries of the stories of four women directors, together with selected quotations from them. After introductory meetings and phone calls with potential interviewees, in-depth interviews were conducted. Each interview took place in an informal setting, and lasted between one and three hours. All interviews were taped and transcribed, with Norwegian transcripts translated to English.

Kristin, Norway

I am 51 years old, and have my first degree in health care. After reaching 30 years of age, I took a college degree in public administration. Till then I had no management position. As a child all my friends but me had a mother at home. My mother was out working, and she very much inspired me to do the same. I was trained in a very intellectual family. Being verbally strong was considered to be important. Intellectual discussions were the glue that kept the family closely knit together. Starting my classes in public administration, I reacted to the teaching methodology, the teacher and the textbooks. I openly said so in some open student meetings, and was soon elected as student representative on the college board. At that time I was married to a man who was several years older than me, and got involved in a group of feminist women, some older than me. We were highly involved in reading feminist literature, preparing feminist protest marches, and trying to improve the work situation for women.

Kristin has been the only woman director in a number of Norwegian public and private organisations and corporations. She started her career as a student representative on her college board and an employee representative on the board of a large and prestigious organisation. She then got into various management positions as, for example, the CEO of a hospital, and a town official. She learned a lot from various mentors, both male and female, including several techniques regarding leading board meetings. She is in high demand for corporate board memberships. Presently she holds the office of board chair in two influential Norwegian organisations. She is widely used as speaker at conferences, and is also a board member of one of the Norwegian major-league soccer teams. In describing some of her gender-related experiences outside the boardroom she said,

Sometimes boards have two-day meetings in some remote hotel or do some kind of tour lasting several days. Most boards are so professional during the board meeting that no sexual problems occur, but these professional roles tend to fade out when you are together for longer periods. I have experienced 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' in some situations. If you go to bed at 11:30 p.m. you are considered to be the boring, sour and unpleasant old maid, but if you don't you will get the questions with sexual over- and undertones. It is easier for men to sit down in hotel rooms with drinks and discuss the upcoming board meeting till two o'clock - than for me to do so with any of my male colleagues. Many informal decisions take place at half past one - after the third scotch.

Kari, Norway

I am the oldest of four siblings, and my father raised me like a boy. At school there were only five girls and 24 boys. We wanted to be at least as tough as the boys, and I had the prerogative of being able to make choices from the top shelf regarding boys wanting to date me. As a youngster I was actively involved in sports and was on the

nationally recruited team in handball. I was training almost every day for many years. Starting college, I was the only girl to take that discipline there, and the second girl ever. I had a lot of energy to channel somewhere, as I was unable to go on with my sports career due to some severe injuries. I got involved in organisations working to preserve the natural environment, and from the very first day at college I took to talking in student meetings. Because I was one of the few persons speaking out at the first student meetings, I got elected as student representative on the college board.

Kari lives in the northern part of Norway, is married and has a 10-year old daughter. Her husband has the main responsibility for the daily running of their household, and also has his own professional career. Presently Kari holds positions on nine boards of various organisations, mostly small firms, but also a bank, the college board where she earlier had been student representative, and in governmental organisations and committees. She has a lot of energy and is extremely hard working. She is the board chair of two firms: in a consultancy firm where she also is an owner, and in a women's handicraft company. She knows that she has been elected as a "female hostage" (token) on some of these boards. At one point she spoke about her relationship as board chair to the CEO of the consultancy firm:

The second CEO could never relate to me because I was a woman. All the other board members also said so in private. He was more than 60 years old, and you don't teach old dogs new tricks. But this year it has been of great importance that I am a woman and as the board chairperson his superior. He has suffered from it. I decided already in April to have him fired and then hold the shareholders' meeting. This has been very tough. And then during the summer, the employee representatives favoured him. I had him finally fired. In a small company like this one, the company depends so very much on the competency of each and everyone. It is a direct relation between how much you work and how much you can bill. It becomes a lifestyle. As a board chairperson I wanted to set standards and be a role model for the management and the employees. In the period of crisis we had a board meeting almost every Friday night, and it happened that we needed the whole weekend. I am glad I have a very flexible husband.

Ann, U.S.

I grew up in a very ethnic neighbourhood. I was the first generation to go to college. My parents were immigrants and had only an eight-grade education [but they] had a very strong obvious motivation. The work ethic was established in me very young, you know, college is your opportunity, education is the important door to the future. I firmly believed in that. I was on a fast track at school. I took chemistry in seventh grade and I had a wonderfully inspiring chemistry teacher. He sent me to university with a scholarship and with his fraternity brother who was Chairman of the Department as my mentor. I have been an active scientist since then. I got my Masters degree - I had a full time job in the labs, and it took me eight years, going to school at nights. At the time I got my degree and married an individual I had met at the laboratory and he was also in school part time. He decided to go on with his Ph.D. and I decided not to because, ... [there were] two of us in the family and I had just become pregnant and so I stopped my Ph.D. studies and he went on. I was offered early on in my career, advancement opportunities into management, which I declined for two reasons. One was because I was very interested in research and wanted to stay there, and second was because there was a bit of family concern. My

husband was European and very oriented to the male as the breadwinner and the female as the homemaker and my career taking a management direction, which his was also taking, was not a very good idea.

After taking early retirement from a 38-year career as Director of Corporate Research in a major oil company, Ann became involved with a number of boards. She presently serves on six corporate boards (*Fortune* 500 and other large firms), has been the chair and a board member of her alma mater, and sits on the boards of more than ten non-profit organisations (mostly arts, education, health care). She reports that she got involved in these boards through her second husband's networking activities ("he's my best public agent"). As a researcher she is extremely well thought of, and has received eight honorary Doctor of Science degrees. In the interview she spoke about opening doors for other women as a manager:

When I did go into management, I had the opportunity to make things better for other women. I equalised salaries immediately as soon as I was in a position where I knew what they all were. I got the company into part-time opportunities. I made sure that all our technical women, even those who worked part time, were fully able to get all benefits including the scientific benefits, going to meetings, publishing papers. Doing everything just as their peers did. So I worked hard on these issues from early on and the company was very receptive.

Ann described the network of women associates and colleagues through which have come a number of her board appointments. She spoke of several women's networks, local and national, that encourage women's board participation, such as the National Women's Economic Alliance and Catalyst. She also referred to the role of search firms which keep lists of women qualified to become directors of large corporations. Ann described her relational experiences on the boards she sits on as:

Excellent, absolutely excellent. They have always been welcoming and I think they listen to me carefully. That I appreciate. They are interested in my opinion. They often seek my opinion. I am included in everything. There are no golf times or something that I'm not invited to or asked. I'm very definitely a part of the organisation ... I don't think I have ever experienced discrimination. I don't think I have ever experienced any kind of unpleasant situation that I could even recall.

Mary, U.S.

Mary is the president of her family business firm. She is married with no children because "I spend a lot of time at work". She has been a member of the board of directors of a large banking corporation for about one year. She was asked to join the banking company's board after her company switched to this bank for its financing needs. She also serves on other non-profit boards (e.g. educational institutions). On two separate occasions during the interview, Mary noted that the reason she was invited to the bank's board was to meet the diversity needs of the company. At one point she said, *I'm sure they wanted a woman on their board.* Despite this, however, she indicated that *so far, I haven't found anything specifically yet that had to do with my sex.* In fact, Mary said that she is not encouraged to say things from a woman's point of view:

Women bring all the qualities just as men do. Business background. There are subtle differences, though. In my perspective as a woman, again it's only been a

year, so I can't say anything from a woman's perspective. But then again, I think in other circumstances, depending on what a business is facing, whatever time frame, a woman may see a different way to handle it. I think it is very helpful, there are times when they would benefit. Women have more open-mindedness about evaluating the future, certain programmes, issues. The for-profit companies are male-dominated business. In the nonprofits, for years they have tried to be diverse - fundraising, and their way of generating revenues - they have to be diverse to survive. It's not that the other has the choice either. It's just when it's a cultural thing, it's not a choice, it's just how it's handled.

Table 2 summarises the main points from the interviews.

Table 2 Comparison of Stories of Women Directors

	Kristin, Norway	Kari, Norway	Ann, U.S.	Mary, U.S.
Main board experiences	Large organisations, health care, sports, public administration	Small organisations, banks, publishing, college	Mega-corporations, financial institutions, universities, healthcare, arts, foundations	Bank, colleges, nonprofits
Background	Father in shipping Coached by mother Age 51 No siblings Charity Remarried, two children	Father carpenter Coached by father Age 40 Oldest of four siblings Sports Married, one child alive	Immigrant parents Husband well connected Remarried	Family business Married, no children
Present job	Management consultant	Regional director of governmental institution (250 employees)	Early retirement	President of family business (manufacturing)
Characteristics	Verbally very clever Feminist	High self esteem Man in skirt Runs with the wolves High energy Does not perceive defeats	Highly self-confident Top scientist/researcher Highly published Well connected in business and scientific community	Business owner Marketing specialist Inquisitive
Motivation for becoming and being a board member	Learning experience, as a person and jobwise Fun	Use of resources and energy Fulfilling	Intellectual challenge Make personal contacts/friends See interesting places Meet interesting people Fun	Learning experience
Main contribution of women directors	Care for others Women's rights Ask revealing "silly" questions Better prepared Nice atmosphere Identification for other women employees	Valuing diversity Token Distribution of intelligence Soft values Nice atmosphere	Preparation Identification for other women employees Creating opportunities for other women employees Training other directors on technical/operational information	Preparation Increasing board diversity Different perspective Questioning

	Kristin, Norway	Kari, Norway	Ann, U.S.	Mary, U.S.
Gender structures	Soft values, not only finance Distribution of intelligence Diversity-pluralism Tokens - coercive pressures Social subgroups Informal decision areas Language differences Protocols Positioning-repetitions Private/business distinctions Quality/quantity Prestige important for men Dealing with defeats Sexual reputation	Coordination with family and private life Need to act like a man No need to be radical or controversial	Working system from the inside Status of husband vis-a-vis wife Informal network among women Need to maintain own identity and style No need to act like a man Women should not take things too seriously	All directors are serious about success and responsibility Women bring same qualities as men Women have different perspectives No exclusionary "golf clubs"
Gender processes	Male and female mentors Ruling techniques Support each other Flirtation and private knowledge Critical mass	Have learned to fight back and manipulate Make alliances Flirtation to get into positions Surprises	Mentors Giving back to others Managing perceptions of not appearing too aggressive Visiting business units	No involvement with women's networks
Advice on how to get through the glass ceiling	Political activities Take initiatives Make contacts Be visible Mentoring Priorities/make choices Rotary Analyse your arenas Be prepared Get informed	Private structuring/make priorities Make contacts and communicate your interests Be visible When you get a position, be well equipped to maintain it Hard work Women's network	Networks Tell people of your interests Get into operations Make priorities	Networks Public awareness Business background

Discussion and Conclusions

The stories related above are of four women with varied nationalities, backgrounds, characteristics, and board experiences. By focusing on their in-depth stories we have gained more detailed knowledge of the processes and structures of board functioning and the roles and behaviours of women corporate directors.

The results of this study indicate certain similarities in the experiences of the four women directors who participated in this study. First, these participants indicated that women directors contribute directly to board actions by providing diversity of ideas and richness of perspective, meeting pressures from stakeholders and creating goodwill, providing a bigger pool of resources and distribution of intelligence, focusing attention on "soft" issues and concerns, including various women's issues, and serving as identification and inspiration for other women employees in their organisations.

Second, the stories also indicate that women directors are conscious of their efforts to enhance board performance by facilitating a comfortable boardroom atmosphere, by setting and modelling a different and kindlier tone and style of interactions, by being extremely well prepared for boardroom deliberations, and by not being afraid to ask probing, and sometimes difficult, questions.

Third, the four directors suggested pathways for other women to break the glass ceiling, particularly by increasing networking of all kinds, including belonging to women's, non-profit, and social networks, by increasing visibility to top leaders in the organisation, by taking initiative within the firm including making contacts and broadcasting special interests and competencies, by obtaining powerful mentors, by continuous prioritising, objective setting and analysis of areas of contribution, by being well prepared and informed, and by gaining operational expertise.

One pattern of difference also emerged in the experiences of women directors from the two countries. While all four women held high ambitions regarding their work careers, they differed with respect to their awareness of and attitudes towards gender-related boardroom processes and structures. The two Norwegian women directors were more vocally feminist than their American counterparts. Kari, for example, was very much aware of the need to fight these issues with men, using the metaphor of "running with the wolves" to describe her experiences. In contrast, the two U.S. directors spoke more of fitting into the accepted business mould, with Ann explicitly urging aspiring women directors not to come across as aggressive, radical, or controversial.

Similarly, U.S. and Norwegian women directors described the gender structures underlying boardroom dynamics in different terms. Both Norwegian women directors made explicit reference to sexual behaviours (including flirtation and sexual approaches) as part of their day-to-day realities on corporate boards. In contrast, neither of the two U.S. women made any reference to sexual behaviours at all, instead referring to the need to be professional and gain power and respect on the basis of technical/operational expertise. Additionally, the Norwegian directors spoke of gender-based inclusion/exclusion dynamics on the board, referring specifically to uneven gender-based power distributions. The two Norwegian women directors talked about several gender-specific structures and processes that influence boardroom behaviours, such as participation in subgroups, limited social relations (closed informal decision arenas), language differences (affecting protocols,

language of discussion, and arguments), ways of competing (role of prestige and status, quantitative versus qualitative, dealing with defeats, etc.), ruling techniques at board meetings (making women invisible, and ridiculous, flirtatious and sexual approaches), beliefs about family life and responsibilities, and the role of sexual reputation. In contrast, the two U.S. women corporate directors denied any such differences in board functioning, saying that they were always treated as equals, that there were no exclusionary "golf clubs", and that social relations were professional, friendly, and cordial between themselves and the men on their boards.

Of course, because of the extremely small sample sizes from the two countries, these differences are highly speculative and warrant further study. Additionally, the variances observed may also be due to methodological differences in the conduct of the study between the two countries (e.g. different sample selection mechanisms, differences in interview length, and differences in the sex of interviewers).

In summary, the present study has contributed to extant knowledge of boardroom dynamics by bringing out details about women's experiences that have not been presented in previous studies of corporate boards. Future research should continue examining the experiences of women corporate directors in comparative studies that explore the relational dynamics involved in the functioning of corporate boards of directors.

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