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## Uncertain, collective and heroic leadership approaches to gender balance change among local leaders in academia

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### ABSTRACT

Heads of department (HoDs) are commonly made responsible for implementing gender balance change in academia. Research has found that they are often reluctant to take ownership of this problem. Our study found that department heads in Norway did take on a lot of ownership for gender balance change and we divided their leadership approaches with regard to gender balance into uncertain, collegial and heroic. However, such approaches did not distinguish much regarding what they were able to do in practice, partly due to restraints from being in a middle-management position. Thus, there is a unexploited potential for HoDs taking a leading role in gender balance change if they are granted more autonomy and more support from above leadership.

### KEYWORDS

Leadership; higher education; department heads; gender balance; Academia

### Introduction

Gender imbalance is an ongoing problem at the professor level in academia, with women accounting for less than a fourth of full professor positions across European higher education institutions (European Commission, 2019, p. 133). Such imbalances have made policymakers and scholars call for action to improve gender balance and to create more gender equal academic institutions (Acker, 2006; Bleijenbergh, 2018; De Vries & van Den Brink, 2016). In order to make lasting changes, leadership has been seen as key (O'Connor, 2020; Kelan & Wratil, 2018). The main strategy for leadership and achieving change in the European Union (EU) as well as the Nordic countries has been gender mainstreaming (Bergmann, 2013; Rodrigo et al., 2021). A critical feature of this strategy is that all leaders in academia should take responsibility for gender balance and gender equality in all decision making. However, in practice, the responsibility of implementing gender balance policies is placed on the local leaders in academia, the Heads of Departments (HoDs).

Previous research finds that HoDs are often resistant to take an active role in gender balance change (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, & Benschop, 2020; Smolović Jones, Smolović Jones, Taylor, & Yarrow, Smolović Jones, et al., 2021) or pay lip service to such policies (Powell, Ah-King, & Hussénus, 2018; Wahl & Holgersson, 2003). While resistance may be productive in uncovering conflicting gender norms and values and also spur negotiations

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of diverse understandings and ownership for gender balance problems (Lansu et al., 2020; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016), we still need a better understanding of what makes local leaders take on responsible and active roles to towards gender balance change.

This paper aims to contribute to such understanding through a case-study of HoDs at four Norwegian universities. Norway is an apt case to explore gender balance change since it has had the most comprehensive policy work for gender equality in research and higher education among the Nordic countries (Husu, 2015). Since the 1990s, Norwegian universities have been obligated by law to make Action Plans for gender equality and the current University and College Act (LOV-2005-04-01-15) demands that they work actively, purposefully and systematically to promote gender equality in all positions. Furthermore, the Norwegian government demands that the universities report back yearly on the improvement of gender balance in permanent positions. In 2020, the percentage of women professors was higher than the EU average, accounting for 32% (NSD 2021), and has been steadily improving. The proportion of women has increased 1% per year over the last decades, with 22.3 and 13.3% of women in full professorship in 2010 and 2000 respectively (NSD – Norwegian Center for Research Data, 2021). This is a slightly higher pace of improvement than the 0.6% in the EU (EC 2019).

Previous studies on HoDs in Norway have shown that they are subjected to strong expectations from university leadership to improve gender balance (Lagesen, 2021; Lagesen & Suboticki, 2021). Thus, on the one hand, HoDs are expected to perform local leadership and act as agents of change. On the other hand, they are in a typical middle-manager position. In this paper we therefore ask, how do department heads perform leadership and how do they enact agency in practice?

Before we explore our own empirical study of HoDs in Norway, we discuss previous literature on department heads and on leadership in higher education.

## Leadership in higher education

It has been common to view HoDs as middle managers, squeezed between leadership from above and sub-politics from below, thus making leadership conduct difficult (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Hancock & Hellawell, 2003; Thornton, Walton, Wilson, & Jones, 2018). Previous research shows that HoDs are often not given enough space or resources for effective leadership (Franken, Penney, & Branson, 2015; Gonaim, 2016). However, they have also been found to have autonomy in setting agendas for their departments and they are important leaders of cultural change (Bystydzienski, Thomas, Howe, & Desai, 2017; Carroll & Wolverton, 2004). Thus, HoDs are potential vital actors in the efforts to achieve gender balance changes.

Academic leadership is traditionally conceptualised as collegial, driven by a community of academics forming a republic of scholars. This is also referred to as post-heroic leadership, where decision power is distributed and decentralised (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016), and where leadership is shared by engaging the wider collective in support of change (Fletcher, 2004). Contrary to a private sector business, this governance ideal is rooted in a university culture where employees require independence and academic freedom, and thus not prone to direct supervision (Bryman, 2008; Sporn, 1996). There are, however, pitfalls. For instance, people can sway HoDs' agendas through the consultation processes, using them for persuasion rather than

dialogue (Hellowell & Hancock, 2001). Furthermore, having to gain wider support for decisions can create vulnerability to resistance, and may slow down change processes (Hancock & Hellowell, 2003; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001).

Heroic leadership with so-called macro leaders has been viewed as essential in gender-balance change (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Kirton, Greene, & Dean, 2007). Contrary to collegial leadership, transformative leadership expects leaders to lead by example, being so-called moral guides and inspiration, often challenging the status quo of an organisation (Bass and Riggio, 2006). This type of leadership is commonly not related to local leadership and could also be seen as potentially hard to enact in the academic sector. University leaders have less control over the management of resources, targets are more difficult to enforce, university goals can be ambivalent, and top-down leadership may threaten academic freedom and authority (Lumby, 2019; Marini, Videira, & Carvalho, 2016; Powell, 2020). Universities are, however, becoming more competitive and can be described as stakeholder organisations which opens up new avenues for local leaders to make strategic decisions to accommodate stakeholders (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Deem, Hillyard, Reed, & Reed, 2007).

In practice, the distinction between leadership approaches is not clear-cut. According to Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2008), leadership is most commonly a hybrid, including both hierarchical and more horizontal processes and attention to context is necessary to devise the most effective leadership strategy. Similarly, Gronn (2009, p. 384) argues that successful leadership includes both individual leaders, as well as wider leadership groups in 'hybrid configurations'. Adserias, Charleston, and Jackson (2017) argue from the related field of diversity leadership, that there is no particular practice of leadership that best improves the diversity agenda and that leaders need to adapt to the contextual features of the setting to be successful. This is also the case in academia, where hybrid versions of collegial and managerial leadership approaches depend, among other things, on national contexts (O'Connor & White, 2011). Variations in gender balance are not just found between national contexts, but also across local contexts, such as departments and units. Thus, how leadership with regard to gender balance is practiced and co-produced at the department level, are important to explore empirically to get a better grasp of gender balance work.

Moreover, although department heads are in leadership positions, they use most of their time for a range of bureaucratic and personnel issues (Smith, 2007), thus their practices are not necessarily associated with leadership. According to Bowman (2002), HoDs work as managers when they are working on policies, processes, and paperwork; but they become leaders when 'they focus on key aspects of organizational culture: mission, vision, engagement and adaptability' (Bowman 2002, p.159). Similarly, Martins (2020), studying efforts to improve diversity, makes a distinction between supervisory and strategic leadership. Whilst the former focuses on tasks, people, and the daily management of diversity; the latter refers to leaders who influence 'the shaping of the meaning of diversity within an organization' (Martins 2020, p.1193–4).

The expansion of new public management and the introduction of metrics and performance indicators that HoDs need to implement (Powell et al., 2018), thus strengthens the management role of HoDs. Some have argued that the neo-liberalist turn has led to less gender equality in academia by putting emphasis on masculinist notions and features of academia (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Lund, 2015). This reaffirms academia

which has been perceived as an institution with a tendency to homosocial reproduction of white, middle-class men (Essed, 2004; Fotaki, 2013;). A resilient culture privileging men through formal and informal mechanisms has been seen to prevent gender policies and managerialism aimed at gender equality have any significant effect (Teelken & Deem, 2013; White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011). There is however no clear evidence that either collegial or managerial leadership is better for women (O'Connor & White, 2011).

Thus, managerial and leadership practices in regard to gender balance change are in practice co-produced. For instance, a key to enacting gender balance change is to put various gender-balance policies into practice which, for department heads, deals rather directly with recruitment and personnel issues. Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens (2010, p. 720–722) make a useful categorisation of such gender balance policies: 1) individual policies which specifically target women based on the assumption that men and women are different, in psychological traits, socialisation, background, different work orientations or career choices; 2) cultural policies which target cultural barriers and biases based on the assumption that norms, ideals and histories exclude women; and 3) structural policies which target the unequal power relations in academia based on the assumption that these put women in a disadvantaged position. Excluding practices related to the implementation of such policies would overlook an important aspect of the HoDs' work for gender-balance change. Therefore, in the remainder of the paper, we ask: how are leadership approaches and practices for gender balance co-produced among Norwegian department heads?

## Methods

Department heads at Norwegian universities are responsible for the daily management of their departments, to stimulate and develop good working environments, ensure quality teaching and research, and for implementing university policies. All universities are obligated to develop Action Plans for gender equality and diversity, whilst department heads are responsible for their implementation.

To explore how HoDs enact these responsibilities in practice, we interviewed 23 department heads from four universities in Norway, which we have called Uni 1–4. The interviewees came from different fields: the natural sciences and mathematics (8); information technology and engineering (6); humanities and economics (9). They were conducted in two rounds; one set of interviews (10) was conducted face to face in Uni 2 in 2017. The second set consisted of 13 interviews at Uni 1, 3, and 4; all conducted in spring 2020 digitally via Teams. The universities have relatively similar gender balance policies, but how much it was emphasised varied a bit between faculties. We could not find that the time-gap of between the interviews influenced interviewees accounts in any significant way. The interviewees were between 35 and 60 years old, thirteen men and ten women, and three had international backgrounds (all women). Interviews were conducted by one or both of the authors and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by a third person.

We asked the department heads about their motivation for applying for the job and what they wanted to achieve for the department to get an impression of their visions as leaders. We also asked about their understanding of gender-balance problems, and what they had done to improve gender balance. In the first round of interviews with HoDs we

were surprised with the level of commitment to gender balance and the leadership role many HoDs took on. In the next round of interviews, we investigated this a bit more thoroughly, not by asking other questions, but by prompting them to say more about it.

We started out the analysis with a bottom-up thematic analysis of practices (Johannessen, Rafoss, & Rasmussen, 2018), by coding all the practices the HoD described as part of their gender balance work. After this initial coding, the second round of analysis was more deductive. We looked at how the identified practices aligned with Timmers et al. (2010) categories of individual, cultural and structural measures. We also coded how the heads described their own leadership approach i.e., how they made decisions which effected gender balance. We identified different leadership approaches and saw how these overlapped with leadership approaches found in the literature. Then we compared how these set of categories related to each other. Together, this abductive approach (Reichertz, 2007) allowed us to compare how the literature on leadership aligns with both how the department heads approach gender balance problems and what they do with it, and how this is co-produced.

### Findings: department heads' diverse leadership practices

Most department heads we interviewed emphasised their main motivation for applying for the leadership position was their desire to influence the department's direction.

I like to have the role, that I can help to influence the development which I see, that I have the opportunity to do as (a) head of department. Even if you are a little bit in the middle (. . .) you have great influence. (Uni 2,9)

It is (. . .) interesting to be influential in shaping the department, and make sure it goes in a sensible direction. (Uni 1,4)

These quotes illustrate what many of our interviewed HoDs emphasised; namely, that being influential in the shaping and the direction of the department was an important motivating factor. A few also mentioned that they enjoyed being part of the management of the university, and as a department head, they also had an upward influence on the system.

Almost all the HoDs said they considered gender balance to be their responsibility and a priority for their departments. Only two of our interviewees said that gender balance was not an important issue, and both worked in departments with a very good gender balance. The HoDs implemented a range of gender-balance measures and practices, with those most common summarised in Table 1. Many of these practices were formulated in university action plans for gender equality, but some were self-initiated. Here we have used the categorisations proposed by Timmers et al., who separate between individual, cultural, and structural measures.

Thus, we found that the HoDs practices towards improving the gender balance were varied, both targeting women (through individual measures), as well as efforts to destabilise the dominant order through structural and cultural change measures which require leadership (Martins, 2020). But, how did these practices coincide with the way HoDs perform leadership? What was the outcome of such co-productions? In the following, we discuss these questions along three categories of leadership that we

**Table 1.** Overview of HoDs practices divided according to individual, cultural, and structural measures.

Individual Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Encourage women to stay in academia through personal expression of support, interviews, and career planning</li> <li>● Support women's career advancement through extra research time, mentorship programmes, qualification and start-up grants</li> <li>● Encourage women to take leadership positions</li> <li>● Design career advancement track</li> <li>● Employ local women with potential committed to an academic career</li> <li>● Increasing women's awareness of gender inequalities and bias</li> <li>● Participate in externally-led projects for improving gender balance</li> <li>● Request that men take a more active role in teaching</li> </ul>
Cultural Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Engage the leadership team in gender-balance work</li> <li>● Speak in support of gender-balance at faculty meetings</li> <li>● Ensure gender-balanced committees in hiring procedures and instruct them to be aware of gender bias</li> <li>● Return committee reports considered to have been evaluated with gender bias</li> <li>● Give less authority to hiring committees and change committee ranking of candidates</li> <li>● Develop role model programmes</li> <li>● Pursue an active family policy for good work-life balance</li> <li>● Work with supervisors to strengthen awareness of gender-balance problems, and work against male supervisors who only support male candidates</li> </ul>
Structural Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use search committees for both men and women when recruiting</li> <li>● Strategically employ associate professors and young researchers</li> <li>● Use moderate gender quotas and, at times, direct calls</li> <li>● Advertise new positions internationally, with long application deadlines and gender-sensitive language</li> <li>● Increase financial means to attract women to departments</li> <li>● Always invite women to interview for new positions, or if none are qualified, extend the application procedure</li> <li>● Strategically select research fields for recruitment</li> <li>● Use personal networks to attract women</li> <li>● Make teaching distribution transparent among employees</li> </ul>

found to be dominant, which we have called uncertain-, collective-, and heroic-leadership. To some extent these are overlapping with categories in the literature, but we have also made some modifications.

### Uncertain gender balance leadership

Only a few department heads in our study were not proactive in their practices and approach towards gender-balance change. For instance, one department head admitted that she believed gender balance would improve 'naturally' through a generational shift of employees:

In the oldest age categories there are men, but they can retire in a relatively short time. So, I guess it doesn't look that bad right now. (Uni1,1)

Although she recognised it was a bit politically incorrect to express, she said gender balance was a lesser concern than other issues she dealt with at the moment.

Still, most heads in this category acknowledged responsibility for gender balance, and contrary to previous research, their approach was more uncertain rather than directly resistant. Their practices may be characterised as bureaucratic and hesitant. For instance, some HoDs described how they were merely implementing selected individual and



structural measures (see Table 1) that were already available for improving gender balance e.g., search committees, having women on assessment committees, international advertisement, or using moderate gender quota in hiring procedures.

Often, such efforts were framed as a response to leadership decisions from above, mainly the faculty. One department head described his role in gender-balance change as fulfilling assignments:

Yes, we always run such a strategy process for the department and make annual plans. Annual plans and three-year plans. And I have, it's not long ago, not more than three weeks, since I had a management dialogue with the faculty. (...) The faculty is very concerned with gender balance (...) and that is something that I have to deliver on as head of (the) department. (Uni2,1)

Strategy development and implementation as we see in this case, may be enacted through rules and procedures coming from higher leadership. While some described that they were not systematic in such efforts, they still maintained that they fulfilled these tasks in line with requirements.

Many expressed a major challenge in attracting qualified women in their field. One interviewee said his leadership influence was limited in practice because of the general problem of a male-dominated discipline.

(...) in our field, the gender balance is certainly not good. It is very skewed in, especially in [discipline]. And that's reflected in our department, so there is every reason to be concerned about (...) what we can do something about. But I want to say something, that maybe not everyone is so aware of, and you work in the field so you may know it, but it is that we do not stand out very much in a negative direction in Norway, because this is the same internationally. (Uni1,2)

This HoD was aware of the structural imbalance and power differences which were rooted in his discipline, and viewed them as a unfavourable situation. While he explains the problem as structural, and thereby limiting his direct impact, he is also aware that saying that may be perceived as a dereliction of responsibility. He says that he does what he can, but that it is difficult due to the overall situation in the field. We do not interpret this as resistance towards action, but rather as an expression of the uncertainty many heads felt for whether their efforts would actually make a difference. The HoD quoted here had actually taken several actions to improve the gender balance such as a change in the ranking to hire women, including women in leadership positions, and being proactive to hire women PhDs and postdocs. Thus, the HoDs' sometimes disempowered narrative about their leadership towards gender balance was not necessarily reflected in their concrete actions.

Another interviewee from the humanities also recognised gender imbalance as firmly rooted within the discipline. He emphasised that he did look for what was in his power to do, and stressed that while he could do something, the instruments at his disposal were limited for making actual changes:

I always think it's important to focus on what you can actually do something about. There are different phases where you can influence more and less, and hiring processes are an example of phases where you can influence more. And we have had a lot of focus on that dimension, but (we) have then, in relation to associate professor positions, ended up hiring



more men than women, even with this (gender-balance) focus. And then I have tried to play the ball upwards, because my conviction is that the instruments one has so far been willing to use, they are not strong enough. (Uni2,3)

He emphasised that he wanted to use stronger means not approved by the higher leadership.

Summarily, we find that those department heads who expressed uncertainty and frustration with their leadership approach still, in practice, worked on improving gender balance. Teelken and Deem (2013, p. 532) argue that rooting gender-equality measures in new managerial modes of governance makes inequality more subtle and less easily detected or challenged, risking more covert discrimination. Although we find that the HoDs may take action even when they do not take ownership of gender-balance problems, such a minimalist approach may not prove sufficient. In our study at least, HoDs whose leadership relied on implementing ready-made solutions were less proactive in leading cultural change and enacting cultural measures (Table 1) within their disciplines, even if they considered it important and their responsibility.

### Collective gender balance leadership

A collegial form of leadership, where department heads make decisions collectively with a collegium of employees, is a well-known leadership practice in academic institutions (Bryman, 2008; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). Not surprisingly, our interviewees often described their leadership practices, not as individual, but collective. Subsequently, they also distributed the responsibility and accountability for gender-balance change among all levels. This was particularly evident with one department head who, when she was asked whom she considered to be responsible for improving gender balance, stressed that everyone was responsible:

It is us [who are responsible for gender balance], all of us. That is, I have a great responsibility, of course, the management over me has a great responsibility, those who are group leaders at my department have a responsibility. All employees have a responsibility. Women have a responsibility; men have a responsibility. (. . .) I think it would be wrong to somehow identify that there was only one person who is responsible (. . .). (Uni3,1)

This interviewee emphasised power as fluid and distributed among all employees, even if the decision power was in the hands of leadership. For another interviewee, leadership was not so much about making strategic goals and decisions, but building good relations:

When it comes to the management philosophy itself, I do not know exactly how to define myself, but I really think more of some kind of relationship leader rather than a very strategic leader. (Uni3,1)

Describing his role as a ‘relationship leader’, he focused on build up good relations between himself and the employees, aiming to show them that they are seen and heard, and encouraging good relations between employees. In this way, his leadership approach aligned with his effort towards cultural change.

It was also common to emphasise the need to create a good, inclusive, and mutually caring working environment that could both attract and keep a diversity of employees. One department head talked about building a culture where people were shielded in certain life phases and, in turn, showing solidarity towards fellow employees and accepting the need to step up when needed.

Having a workplace that is flexible enough and generous enough to take care of people in it, in the various phases, is at least something that I, as a leader, strive for. (Uni2,2)

Creating such a culture was explained an indirect way of improving gender balance. For instance, by supporting women who had young children by explicitly not expecting everyone to work extensively at all times, but rather have more dynamic model for contributions based on (changing) life situations. Thus, these were practices that did not address individual women but build on the idea that a good work environment would make the department more attractive for women and men. Another way of doing this was to make an effort to ensure women employees were not put in settings where they would be alone or in a very small minority, for example in a research group:

(. . .)if you have environments, smaller groups, that are subcritical, of women, (. . .) then it is not wise to hire one, but you should preferably go in and hire a minimum of two, maybe even more (women). (Uni2,2)

Collective culture was also promoted through hiring new employees. Several HoDs said that it was easier to hire women if one had a broader set of criteria for who was deemed the best or most suitable. As noted above, looking for 'suitability' has in previous research been found to be closely related to homosocial reproduction and thereby benefit men. However, in this case it was explicitly used as a way to benefit women applicants. Moreover, achieving gender balance was perceived to enhance diversity by bringing in different professional perspectives.

Part of the community building was described as creating an environment where different values and practices could contribute to improving the department. In practice, this was done through mainstreaming, like encouraging young researchers to stay, talking about discrimination in meetings, and specifically speaking to supervisors and research groups leaders who were assumed to be important gatekeepers. However, some practices, like the nudging of women in their career development, were often also described as individual measure rather than collective. Some HoDs described this as an effort to show women that 'they are seen and valued' by pushing and motivating them in their careers, personally advising them to apply to certain grants, encourage them to apply for professorship, help them prioritise, and consistently show interest in their work. This may be described as non-collegial practice (Hellowell & Hancock, 2001) because it favours some (women), over other employees, but even with HoDs who would generally stress collegiality and transparency, some degree of discreetness was deemed necessary to maintain cohesion and collective support for gender balance measures.

At other times, there was a clear expectation of collective support for gender-balance change. As one head said:

No, in the end it is my responsibility as head of department, but (...) even though I am head of (the) department (...) I head, in a way, a collective. It is, as I say, it is a fairly flat structure. (...) all the decisions that I make, I have to make sure to anchor all the time in the rest of the staff, or at least in the important part of the staff. (...) if a large proportion of key people at the department think that we should drive to the right, then I cannot lead the department to the left. It will be completely impossible. So even though I have the formal responsibility, (...) there is still a collective responsibility (Uni3,2)

However, as we see from the quote, the collective was not entirely egalitarian since some were referred to as 'key people' and 'the important part of the staff'. These were most likely senior staff members, in professor positions. Thus, this signified that the collective approach involved a hierarchy. Even so, gender balance change was depicted by the interviewees in this category as a collective practice where everyone worked on finding and motivating women to apply for new openings at their departments. In other cases, the HoDs also described how they commended and approved of employees who spoke up against what they described as a 'macho culture', which usually referred to gender derogatory language during, for instance during lunches, meetings, and field trips.

In sum, for some department heads, the leadership approach to gender balance was something they worked towards with, and through, the collective, with leadership practices focusing on building inclusive collectives and organisational cultures. In practice, this was done mainly by implementing all three types of measures (Table 1), through mainstreaming strategies, meaning that the whole collective was enrolled in improving the gender balance. However, at times, some HoDs also relied on more covert practices that targeted individual women and thereby also hid their agenda and overt leadership.

### Heroic gender balance leadership

As the department head role is increasingly more professionalised (Smith, 2007), department heads are expected to take an active and strategic leadership role in improving gender balance, such as leading by example as well as initiating and driving culture change (Kotter, 1996; Martins, 2020). Our study also found several department heads who described their practices in line with tenets of heroic leadership, as a strategic, proactive and ambitious pursuit to improve gender balance.

HoDs in this category perceived it as their personal leadership goal to achieve a more women-friendly culture and also to get more women into leadership positions. One head (Uni 4,2) stressed how she had implemented transparent systems as a means to change what she considered to be a system where women were doing the 'academic housework' by taking too much of the teaching load. She was trying to make older male colleagues responsible for tasks that could contribute to a gender imbalance.

I am actively trying to enrol the older men in teaching, emphasising that this is a load that we are all supposed to share between us. It was less of that before, but now we have made it a bit more orderly, and transparent what people contribute. Not control, but making them accountable. (Uni4,2)

She also said she was constantly searching for ‘what more can be done’ to improve the situation and that she was trying to raise self-reflection and awareness among women employees by talking to them about the structural inequalities which are stacked against them.

Some HoDs in this category also wanted to actively challenge what they perceived to be academic norms and values they considered counterproductive to achieve gender balance. One interviewee said he tried to challenge his employees who, he said, believed that ‘the university belongs to them and was established with them in mind’, and who considered knowledge production to be ‘genderless’ and non-discriminatory. His opposition to such beliefs was tangible in how he conducted the hiring procedures, where he tried to devise proceedings with recognition of gender bias. For instance, he tried to include more than one woman in assessment committees and instructed staff to focus on the content of papers rather than journals, which he believed had been a tradition.

HoDs in this category took their responsibility to improve gender balance very seriously and made a personal effort to improve gender balance beyond what was expected of them. One department head described her role as a ‘fighter’ for gender balance and had put herself on every hiring committee.

I want to increase the proportion of women so that it is 50/50 and I am on all hiring committees now, at least for the next four years, possibly the next eight years. And it’s definitely one of my key issues, issues I fight for. (Uni4,2)

We saw that some HoDs viewed improving gender balance as a personal battle and not something demanded by the higher leadership. On the contrary, some were quite critical to leaders above them for not being sufficiently dedicated or serious about gender balance issues. One department head reflected how it was easier to take a passive role, but that he instead chose to make an extra effort to recruit women.

In a place like this, it would be so easy to just hide and be passive. If you do that, you have your back covered because you have only made decisions based on scholarly criteria. But there are other aspects, other dimensions to emphasise. We have chosen to focus on personal suitability. (Uni2,1)

This HoD actively breaks out of the narrow and uncontroversial zone of relying on scholarly excellence and emphasises broader criteria of personal suitability, which he considered a way to give more space to hire women. Quite a few HoDs said that they would have wanted to take more radical steps, but felt limited by the faculty leadership or administration. They felt they were not given the freedom to take certain actions like for example creating radical quotas for women. One HoD had proposed two radical steps which were to only recruit people within a women-oriented research field, or to reserve all new positions for women. Neither of which got support from the faculty:

I contacted this administration at our section, the personnel department. And then I said that if gender balance is important for the university in [uni 4] then we can fix it, but then we have to get the right tools to fix it. (Uni4,1)

Thus, although wanting to perform ‘heroic leadership’ by tailoring new and radical measures, they were constrained by the university leadership, especially the faculty.

HoDs were also dependent on support from the employees, even if they wanted to lead heroically. One interviewee said he wanted to make bold decisions by only nominating women for a postdoc position and thus deliberately discriminate against men. He planned to keep it low-profile, but also needed to consult with his closest colleagues, which he needed to have on board

It is a process where I have told the professional groups that, I personally, want (. . .) at least one of the two (postdoc candidates) that we are allowed to nominate, should be a woman. (Uni2,1)

Collegial support was thus important for department heads who wanted to take radical steps to improve gender balance, but again we see that it may rely on a selected group and not the department as a whole.

To sum up, there was a group of department heads who made efforts towards a proactive and 'heroic' leadership practice and took more radical steps than what was expected. They were also prepared to practice actions that overtly favoured women in their departments and that they expected to be unpopular with employees, thereby leading by example. However, they found that their actions were partially limited by a lack of support from the leadership above, meaning they often had to resort to more modest measures suitable for collegial acceptance. Thus, attempts of 'heroic leadership' became moderated by anticipated concern from employees and lack of support from above leadership.

## Conclusion

In previous research HoDs have been depicted as resistant and passive in their response to demands for gender balance change. We wanted to get a better grasp of how HoDs dealt with this demand to lead their departments towards gender balance. We viewed local leadership as co-produced, as an amalgam of leadership approaches, and implementation of policies and other efforts aimed at gender-balance change. The relation between leadership approach and practices is also interesting.

We found that contrary to many other studies, most HoDs in our sample were committed to gender balance change, albeit some were hesitant and uncertain about what to do. Still, HoDs in this category did enact measures, mainly as a response to explicit demands from university leadership. We have categorised such hybrid leadership approaches into three categories which overlapped quite a lot with leadership approaches and styles identified in the literature and that indicate a level of commitment to gender balance change; namely, uncertain, collective, and heroic gender balance leadership. However, when we look at the concrete measures and practices that HoDs enacted, the differences between these categories were less pronounced.

What we found was that the HoDs with an uncertain approach primarily implemented a selection of the individual and structural measures which were promoted by the faculty leadership. Amongst the HoDs who argued a collective approach to gender balance change there was more emphasis on fostering cultural change. However, some of the HoDs in this category did not see themselves as more responsible than other members of staff for achieving this, while others took a more active approach. The category of HoDs who took a 'heroic' approach to changing gender balance were restrained by a middle

management position and had to resort to the same practices and measures as those who took different approaches. The HoDs with a collective and heroic gender balance leadership approach took on more responsibility for enacting change and were also more creative in designing practices and measures to improve gender balance. However, their autonomy was constrained and thus, they were challenged by their middle management position, as stressed in other research (Martins, 2020; Thornton et al., 2018). We saw that across the different leadership approaches and practices enacted by our interviewees, university leadership and employee were putting pressure on their opportunities for action. This resulted in some HoDs choosing to operate covertly to avoid employee dissatisfaction (collective), and some having to subdue ideas for change (heroic).

We believe this study indicates that there may be an unused potential for improving gender balance change by granting HoDs space for taking on responsibility, developing motivation and ownership to the problem and its solutions. Our argument builds on anecdotal evidence from the data, where we found that the department which had been most successful with improving gender balance was one where the department head had a clear ambition of changing the balance and used a range of measures to recruit women and also worked actively to foster a culture where gender balance was perceived as a legitimate goal among all employees. Much focus has been put on how HoDs need to take more responsibility and improve their awareness of gender balance problems. In the case of Norway, it seems that gender policies and raising awareness has been effective in making HoDs perceive gender balance as a legitimate goal, but they also need to be given more autonomy to develop practices and enact measures that can lead to change.

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