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Department heads enacting gender balance policies: navigating voices of ambiguity and concern

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ABSTRACT

Local leaders in academia have been perceived as resisting the role as change agents for gender balance. Employing a concept of voices inspired by Bakhtin, we found that department heads has to negotiate ambiguous and blurred voices from the leadership as well as critical and concerned voices from employees which lead them to thread carefully when enacting gender balance policies. Thus, there is considerable space for leadership to facilitate department heads work with gender balance by allowing them more space for agency and provide support to give them more authority and legitimacy as change agents. This would also help department heads in their attempts of destabilizing a one-dimensional and simplistic view of meritocracy and their enactments of more radical interpretations of gender balance policies.

Introduction

While there has been a steady increase of women in lower academic positions throughout Europe the last two decades, women are still underrepresented at the top level in academia (EC 2019). Only 24% of professors are women in EU-28 (European Commission 2019, 133). Since the mid-nineties there has been much policy focus on improving the (representative) balance between the men and women in professor positions (hereby called gender balance) in top positions in science. Bodies such as the European Commission (EC), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), and the European Research Area (ERA), as well as numerous national level institutions, have called for various measures (European Commission 2019; Drew and Canavan 2020; Kantola and Lombardo 2018; Rosa, Drew, and Canavan 2020). However, the most common policy strategy has been 'gender mainstreaming' which has dominated internationally since the end of the 1980s (True 2003). Gender mainstreaming has many definitions and comprise different practices (Eveline and Bacchi 2005, Walby 2005), but it can generally be described as a top-down strategy requiring that policymakers and decision-makers integrate a gender perspective in all decisions and all policymaking (Council of the European Union 2015). While there has been some improvement in the proportion of women professors in the EU countries, the change has been slow, uneven

and varied across contexts. The share of women in grade A positions across Europe (EU-28) has increased only six per cent since 2009 (EC 2009). This indicates that strategies and policies have had limited effect.

Müller et al. (2011, 300) argue that in spite of numerous policies, initiatives and research, there is so far no empirically grounded theory model for gender balance change in academia. Moreover, researchers trying to identify successful policies and strategies to improve gender balance have struggled to do so (Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens 2010; Riegraf et al. 2010). There may be several reasons for this. First, there is a tendency not to evaluate gender balance measures for efficacy (Dobbin and Kalev 2018; Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens 2010). This may have to do with many gender balance measures being long-term and thus need longitudinal studies to show effects. Second, if the problem at hand requires a profound cultural change, it is difficult to achieve (Benschop and Van den Brink 2018). Third, many gender balance policies are typically top-down made on a transnational, national and/or institutional level, with a tendency to assume that the same measures are effective across all disciplines and institutions.

But, empirical findings show that the gender balance varies quite substantially across departments, fields, and disciplines. This means that gender balance problems may also be highly local or discipline-based (Lagesen 2021; Mann and Diprete 2013; Pearson, Frehill, and McNeely 2015; Silander, Haake, and Lindberg 2013). Moreover, the actual implementation of gender balance policies takes place on a local level. Thus, in order to better grasp how gender balance may be improved and nurtured, it is vital to study how such policies are dealt with at the local level.

In the academic context, the actors mainly expected to implement gender balance policies on a local level are the department heads. Department heads play a crucial role in the management and leadership of academic work (Bowman 2002, Bozeman et al. 2013.; Floyd and Dimmock 2011; Gonaim 2016; Smith 2007; Thornton et al. 2018, Wolverton et al. 2005). Such management includes tasks and decision-making that influences the local gender balance, such as recruitment and hiring processes, promotions, mentoring, and teaching load and scheduling (Aziz et al. 2005; Bleiklie and Kogan 2007; Carroll and Wolverton 2004; Deem 2003). Moreover, heads of departments may be important supporters or gate keepers for women's promotion (Beddoes and Schimpf 2018). However, the research on local management of gender balance has so far been more concerned with showing how women's careers are obstructed by gatekeeping and exclusionary practices (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012, Van den Brink and Benschop 2014; Husu 2001; Nielsen 2016) and less on successful inclusion practices. In this paper we want to focus on how department heads may be important supporters and potential change agents for better gender balance. How are local leaders responding to institutional gender balance policies and how do they understand their role and others when asked to enact gender balance policies?

We will begin by reviewing previous studies of department heads' efforts to improve gender balance and make an argument for why greater attention to an analysis of actor's accounts of their practices can enrich understanding of gender balance policy implementation. Next, we describe the Norwegian higher education context and the qualitative study we conducted. In the empirical section we show how department heads negotiate with three key sets of voices when they are accounting for their practices of implementing

gender balance measures. We will argue that the complexity of voices makes actions challenging and, that clearer and less ambiguous voices from the leadership and more space for negotiation of key policies would have benefitted the department heads in becoming more successful change agents for gender balance.

Local efforts to improve gender balance

A large body of research has focused on why women do not advance in scientific careers as much as men (see Fox, Whittington, and Linková 2017 for an overview). However, there is not sufficient understanding of what it takes to overcome such barriers and create a change (Benschop and Van den Brink 2018). There has been an emphasis of barriers for women academics, ranging from discrimination and sexism in the workplace (Bailyn 2003; Britton 2017; Fotaki 2013; Savigny 2019), gender biased constructions of meritocracy (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012, 2014; O'Connor et al. 2020), and the effect of the construction of ideal academics (Lund 2015). Furthermore, there has been a focus on poor work/life balance and how the division of domestic work influences women's career choices (Deutsch and Yao 2014, Huppatz, Sang, and Napier 2019; Thun 2020; Van Anders 2004). Gendered work division in academia, where women do a larger share of non-meriting work tasks has also been suggested as a reason why women do not advance or advance at a slower pace than men (Guarino and Borden 2017; Macfarlane and Burg 2019).

Similarly, much literature on the role of department heads in changing the gender balance has argued that they engage in 'micro-politics', the exertion of informal power (Pfeffer 1981) which has been used by men to prefer other men – consciously or unconsciously – especially in hiring processes (Morley 1999; Van den Brink 2010; O'Connor et al. 2020). Nielsen (2016) shows that while department heads in a Danish university had strong principles of merit as a basis of recruitment and promotion, these principles were often violated in practice. Subtle selection and pre-selection practices made certain that the 'right persons' were hired, these practices included narrowing the call and relying on personal connections and network when making decisions. While Nielsen (2016) did not find that this led directly to reducing women's chances, he alleges that such practices make academic promotion procedures less open, and thus vulnerable to bias. Van den Brink (2010) found that department heads admitted to manipulating evaluation committees so that the selected candidate would win, while committee members described themselves as sometimes being merely 'decorative', since the candidate had already been decided upon by the chair (Van den Brink 2010, 87). Such gendered homophily, where decision-makers tend to choose people they find a 'good fit', has been found to lead to 'cloning' of white, middle-aged men (Essed 2004; Van den Brink and Benschop 2014). Thus, department heads who have a key role in recruitment processes are important gatekeepers.

Research has so far indicated that department heads have not been a driving force for improving gender balance. Studies has also found that department heads are reluctant to take ownership and implement gender balance policies (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop 2020; Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius 2018). A review of gender equality measures across 14 universities in the Netherlands found that department heads both

lacked knowledge of the gender balance in their departments and the will to focus on the issue (Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens 2010). Moreover, resistance among middle managers toward gender equality efforts has been a common finding in gender equality change literature. This includes a lack of willingness to take on ownership to the problem, particularly when directives are imposed from above (Teelken and Deem 2013; Mergaert and Lombardo 2014; Callerstig 2016; Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius 2018). Resisting or dismissal of gender equality policies has also been explained as being a result of competing policy frames such as meritocracy and economy. Particularly the notion among department heads that academia is a meritocracy, and that meritocracy is gender-neutral, lead to resistance toward promoting of women (Nielsen 2016; Van den Brink and Benschop 2014). Moreover, notions and discourses of gender imbalance being the result of choices made by men and women based on biological differences is producing resistance (Calás, Smircich, and Holvino 2014; Cavaghan 2013, 2017). Cavaghan (2013) finds that different kinds of 'gender knowledge', that is,'how the sexes and relations between them are perceived, both intentionally and unconsciously and on what grounds' (p. 410), made a difference to the willingness and capability to enact gender mainstreaming policies in EU units. Those who believed that gender differences were due to biologically based preferences were neither willing to nor had the capability to integrate a gender perspective in their decision-making. Similarly, Humbert, Kelan, and van den Brink (2019) found that 'essentialist gender beliefs' (the view that men and women are fundamentally different in traits and preferences) were associated with lower support for gender quotas and women-targeted measures among leaders and particularly among leaders who were men.

However, resistance toward gender equality measures has also been perceived as constructive as it opens a space for negotiations, contestation and potentially change (Benschop and Van den Brink 2018). Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop (2020) found that middle managers in academia exhibited many forms of resistance. They refused to acknowledge that gender equality was a problem and refused to become change agents, and thus did not take substantial action towards gender equality (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop 2020, 7). They conclude that for resistance to become productive, a considerable effort was needed in the shape of a 'long, facilitated discussion, including participants with different perspectives on gender inequality in the organization, including gender experts and with the support of top management' (p. 7). Furthermore, resistance to acknowledge responsibility or take action was not a binary, but rather a multilayered web stemming from the need to accommodate different personal and group needs and concerns. Similarly, Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius (2018) investigated resistance and reactions as discursive practices, looking at participants (mainly leaders and university teachers) of a gender equality project in a Swedish university. They found non-binary and complex modes of resistance and reactions. Participants, including leaders, would change their reaction and mode of resistance during the project, even varying their resistance by context. While some could be supportive towards policies and the idea of gender equality, such support often dwindled when it came down to practices or more binding obligations. Thus, Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius (2018) call for further research on how normative practices become a barrier for gender equality projects and the implementation of gender equality policies.

In our analysis, we will use these findings as a starting point and explore an even deeper understanding of local university leaders actions by analyzing which voices they converse with and which, and whose viewpoints they are navigating and negotiating with when they account for their work with gender balance.

Case, approach and method

The context of our study is Norway, a Scandinavian welfare state ranked the third most gender equal country in the world (World Economic Forum 2021, 10). According to Husu (2015) Norway has employed the most comprehensive policy approach to addressing gender inequalities in academia among the Nordic welfare states (Husu 2015). The proportion of women full professors is slightly higher than the EU average, 32% and has increased approx. 1 percentage point per year since 1991, slightly faster than the EU-28.

In Norway, gender equality in research has predominantly been sought through judicial means and legislation against gender discrimination as well as national programmes and policies for improving gender equality and gender balance. Since the mid-nineties, the Ministry of Education and Research in Norway has mandated that universities and colleges to draw up action plans for achieving gender equality. These action plans include both affirmative action measures which are intended to directly benefit advancement of women in academia, and more organizational and collectively oriented measures for developing good working cultures for men and women.

The Norwegian laws both prohibit gender discrimination and set requirements for higher education institutions to take clear measures to improve gender equality i.e. to work actively, purposefully, and systematically to promote gender equality in all positions (Bergman and Rustad 2013). For instance, the Norwegian government has been open to the use of quotas (Skjeie and Teigen 2005; Sørensen 2019), in fact, the use of moderate quotas is mandated by law when recruiting to positions in the public sector when the share of women is lower than 40%.[1] Higher education institutions are also required to report to the government what they do to improve gender equality. This goal is made more concrete through the award letters from the government for 2021 which define the financial framework and priorities for higher education .[2]

Since 2004 a national committee for women in science,[3] appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research, has had as a mandate to support and provide recommendations for improving gender equality and gender balance among professors. Recently, this has been expanded to include diversity in academia. The committee is intended to be a driving force, an advisor for gender equality and an intermediator for knowledge and research on the subject. This focus on gender balance became further accentuated when the Norwegian Research Council in 2012 launched the ten-year research program BALANSE, with the overall goal of improving gender equality and gender balance in research, with a particular focus on increasing the share of women professors.[4] Like many other European countries and bodies, 'gender mainstreaming' is the preferred strategy (Bergman 2013, Rees 1998). However, what gender mainstreaming entails in practice varies significantly (Booth and Bennett 2002, Daly 2005,). As previously noted, the success of such strategies relies on the implementation at the local level. Looking at the figures of women professors in Norway, we found that they vary significantly between

institutions and within institutions. This suggests that while national policy making may have been somewhat successful, how such policies are adopted on a local level is key (Lagesen 2021).

We have chosen to investigate this response to policies on a local level with an interpretive policy approach which is suitable to analyze agency, and how practices are constructed. The approach allows explorations of the construction of institutions, identities, organizations, and cultures, but also shows how political and cultural contextual frames contribute to shape these constructions (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2012, 46). The production of meaning and meaning-making processes can be analyzed in a number of different ways, for example, in a symbolical interactionist perspective where meaning making takes place in social interactions between individuals (Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003).

In this paper we will study meaning-making through analyzing individual accounts and the negotiation of 'voices' in such accounts. This is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin and his ideas about language and communication (1986). Bakhtin sees language not as a neutral linguistic resource, but as something already 'overpopulated' with other people's voices and the social practices and contexts they invoke. According to Bakhtin, we struggle to produce our own meaning out of the myriad of voices we invoke (Maybin 2001). Voices will be utilized as an analytical focal point to tease out and make visible how our interviewees negotiate a multiplicity of norms, ideals, politics, knowledge and concerns represented by other actors' voices (Lagesen 2005). Thus, we view individual accounts as performative, as 'speech acts' (Austin 1975, Ahmed 2012), where voices are invoked to negotiate meaning in relation to a particular issue or situation. We believe this is as a useful analytical approach to make contradictions, antagonisms, and ambiguities commonly encountered in interview analysis visible. Thus, we understand that our interviewees enact these voices both to negotiate or express their own views, and to express their uncertainty, doubts, and concerns.

Research has indicated that we should to some extent expect local leaders to dismiss ownership of gender balance problems, and to resist a role as change agents (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop 2020; Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius 2018, Timmers et al. 2010). Do we find such resistance, and if so, how it is accounted for? How do department heads navigate expectations that they should be change agents for gender balance in academia?

In answering this we draw on a set of semi-structured interviews from the four largest universities in Norway which we have called Uni 1, Uni 2, Uni 3 and Uni 4. We interviewed 23 department heads from a wide range of disciplines, in six faculties of natural sciences (5), mathematics (3), information technology (4), engineering (2), humanities (4) and economics (5). From these, 13 of the department heads were men and ten were women. All were between 35 and 60 years old and three were international scholars. We conducted two sub-sets of interviews. One sub-set comprised physical interviews with ten department heads in Uni 2 in 2017. A second sub-set included 14 interviews in Uni 1, Uni 3 and Uni 4, conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams in the spring of 2020. The interviews took place in the interviewees work offices or their home offices. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The department heads were informed that the interviews were part of a larger research project on gender balance in academia. It was, however, important for us to make it clear that we were not conducting

an evaluation of the department heads work, but that we wanted to gain insight into their own experiences with implementing gender balance policies. They were also informed that the interviews would be anonymized and treated confidentially.

We began by asking our interviewees about their motivations for becoming local leaders and their leadership philosophy and visions for their departments. Then we asked about their understanding of gender balance in their departments, their role with regard to improving gender balance, and what they had done to improve gender balance. The department heads were aware that we, the interviewers, were scholars working with gender balance, and thus considered experts in the field. The interviewees would sometimes ask us directly for input or advice or make comments such as 'well, you probably know better . . . '. All the universities were involved in some kind of gender balance effort, but the degree to which the different department heads were involved with and conscious of such efforts varied greatly. Even so, all department heads were aware of the issue of gender balance because of the political emphasis put on it. Some departments were also involved in gender balance projects funded by the Norwegian Research Council. There were no visible patterns in how this influenced the department heads' account of topics we concentrate on in this paper. Moreover, we did not find that the gender of the department heads impacted the way they accounted for the topics discussed in this paper.

In the analysis we set out to explore our interviews as dialogic settings, aiming to identify voices in their accounts. We defined voices in a rather broad manner. Some voices were explicitly paraphrasing other people, while other voices were invoked to express the views of others. We also included points of view that appeared more indirectly when interviewees talked about controversies, paying special attention to the voices that were given legitimacy and authority. Bakhtin's conceptualization of voices may be understood as normative (Maybin 2001; Lagesen 2005), meaning that invoking voices may be a way to either legitimize and support one's own opinion, or oppose the opinions of others. As such, they can be instruments for positioning. In this sense we consider an analysis of voices as indicative of established norms and practices. In the remainder of the article we therefore outline and discuss the other voices we found salient in the department heads accounts, before concluding what such voices mean and how they impact gender balance work .

Negotiating voices of ambivalence and concern

> When the [gender]balance is good, you work better in teams, you produce more, you make better decisions, and you thrive more. (Uni 4)

Our study investigates how department heads responded to gender balance policies and which voices were salient when they accounted for their work with it. As mentioned, other recent studies (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop 2020; Powell, Ah-King, and Hussénius 2018) found resistance and displacement of ownership to be the problem. Was this evident in our study? Not really.As the quote in the vignette illustrates, most of the department heads we interviewed expressed that they found gender balance to be an important goal for their department. Even if few of them knew the details of the university action plan for gender equality, or had even seen it, most were familiar with its content. Some, who looked up the action plan during the interview, confirmed that

these where indeed measures they were familiar with and deployed on a regular basis. Some had been informed about these measures through faculty meetings or other communication from the faculty .

The fact that the department head expressed that gender balance was important is perhaps not so surprising, since being against gender balance is difficult, at least on a policy level, in a Nordic welfare state like Norway (Skjeie and Teigen 2005, Melby et al. 2009). Thus, while to some extent this could be expected, we were nevertheless struck by how department heads did not just express a general support for gender balance but articulated quite specific and concrete arguments for why they considered it an important goal to strive for. The most common arguments related to the benefits of gender balance for the work environment in their departments, and for providing sorely needed role models for women students. Some also considered it a strategy to recruit the most talented scholars, and thus as a means for achieving excellence. Clearly, this should be interpreted within the context of the political push for gender balance that has been more prominent in Norway compared to many other countries. None of our interviewees problematized this as an important goal, although some commented that their awareness of gender balance issues and problems had increased lately. Regarding so-called gender knowledge, a few department heads were also familiar with gender research which they used to make sense of the gender imbalance situation in their department and how to handle it.

> I am very interested in gender research, especially in Academia, and I am very happy to read all these research analyses that in CV's (…) [gender] are assessed differently both academically and especially in management positions. (Uni 4)

Concepts and phenomena such as 'leaky pipelines' and 'unconscious' bias were familiar for many of the department heads. Some also talked about and related to such concepts, demonstrating that they were engaged with such topics. Moreover, with one exception, no one offered explanations or posited essentialist arguments about gender. The department head who did, said he thought perhaps men and women had different interests and because of that chose different career trajectories. In general, essentialist discourses about gender were not invoked by the department heads we interviewed.

Thus, almost all interviewees depicted gender balance as a goal towards which they were taking active measures. However, it was a goal that many found hard to achieve. Part of the challenge was navigating between contradicting norms, viewpoints, and competing policy concerns (Cavaghan 2017). This can be illustrated by three sets of voices which stood out to us as salient in the department heads accounts, which came from the leadership, the academic community, and from women. In the following, we will discuss each consecutively.

Voices from the leadership

All department heads acknowledged that it was their responsibility to improve the gender balance in their respective departments, and they considered themselves to be well positioned for doing so. They said that it was mainly the Deans, the faculty leadership, that asked them to do something about it.

> The dean comes to us and says: 'Now, what are you doing to change the gender balance?' (Uni 3)

> I find the Faculty very focused on improving the gender balance (...) It is like: Why don't you get enough women? (laughter) (Uni 2)

These voices from the Deans were authoritative, demanding that the department heads take action to improve the gender balance (Bleijenbergh 2018). Such authoritative voices were to some extent appreciated by department heads because they legitimized spending time and resources on gender balance work.

> (...) if there is funding available somewhere, I use some extra energy on finding solutions for women postdocs, rather than men postdocs. I believe that to be legitimate because it is embedded in a [gender balance] strategy. (Uni 2)

Even so, there was a slight undertone of frustration. Many had tried for many years to hire more women without succeeding significantly. So, there was considerable uncertainty about how they should go about improving the gender balance, and not much help available from the leadership. 'We have not received any direct instructions for how we should do it.' (Uni 3)

Thus, the leadership voice was perceived as authoritative but not very helpful. Some Faculties offered measures that department heads were encouraged to use, like mentorship-programmes and extra funding packages for women employees. These standardized institutional measures were all so-called affirmative action measures to support and help individual women (Crosby, Iyer, and Sincharoen 2006). Additionally, department heads were encouraged to use other more 'mainstreaming' measures such as appointing search committees when hiring.

The main problem for many department heads was that the measures offered by the leadership and the institution were not perceived to be sufficient or radical enough to really make a difference.

> Well, just take a look at the results. It is not working. The means are not strong enough. Or, they are not used systematically or clearly enough. Measures like radical quotas do exist, and closed calls, those kinds of things. But, that is perceived too radical, you won't get permission for doing that. (Uni 2)

This caused frustration and some considered the voices from the Leadership to be ambiguous.

> (...) I do find it to be a discrepancy between words and reality [from the leadership]. I would have wanted more straight forward talk. Because we get to hear that it is great if we manage to hire a woman, but that it should not in any circumstance be at the expense of meritocracy. (Uni 2).

Voices coming from the leadership were perceived to be more concerned with excellence and meritocracy than achieving gender balance. This was echoed by several department heads. They found it difficult to prioritize between the different policy goals that were imposed on them, because the leadership voice was blurred about what should be prioritized. One head put it even stronger, that the way Uni 2 was handling gender

balance showed that they did not really consider it important. If they really wanted to do something about it, they could have. Thus, the voices were perceived to be self-contradicting because the message was not backed up by actions or enough support.

> It is my impression that [The university] say they want it, but "unfortunately, we did not succeed". (. . .) Because it is not a priority. (. . .) At the [University] there is not enough will to actually make gender balance happen. (Uni 2)

On the one hand, this lack of clear message created space for department heads to interpret and do as they liked. On the other hand, it also frustrated department heads who wanted to make a change because they were not allowed to use more radical means for achieving what was demanded from them.

> (. . .) I can fix the gender balance in a couple of years, if I was allowed to choose the right measures. But we are not, you know. I was told that it was not judicially correct to do so. So, that means I am stuck with the 'after dinner speeches'. (Uni 4)

It was also noted that the leadership did not perform gender balance either, which also undermined their voice about the importance of gender balance.

> (. . .) If everyone on all leadership levels had been equally concerned with this, it would be difficult not to take it seriously. But (. . .) on higher leadership level they also lack women (. . .) (Uni 2)

Voices from the leadership were on the one hand authoritative when they demanded that department heads do more to improve gender balance. However, this was undermined by other voices saying that excellence was most important. This ambiguity was reinforced by what was considered to be a lack of will to put gender balance more on the agenda, for not allowing more radical means and for not helping to prioritize between different policy goals.

To sum up, we see that voices from the leadership were negotiated by the departments heads to position themselves as potential change agents, but not really allowed space to or given sufficiently support to enact desired measure. In the case of some department heads this could be interpreted as a way to avoid responsibility. For others, it could also be interpreted as a genuine frustration because they considered gender balance to be important and beneficial for their department. In any case, most department heads called for a clearer and less ambiguous policy regarding gender balance, which could help them prioritize between goals that were perceived as sometimes contradictory and give support to stronger actions to change the gender balance.

Voices from the academic community

Another set of voices that were negotiated in the department heads accounts were from employees and colleagues in the academic community. In general, most department heads considered their employees and colleagues to be supportive of the policy goals of gender balance, at least in theory.

> There is widespread acceptance at the department that something must be done, that we cannot, we cannot just be men working in these positions. (Uni 4)

> I don't experience any resistance toward it [working with gender balance]. But– when we had this as a topic on our strategy day (…) many very quickly became defensive. Because they felt personally accused … (Uni 2)

Department heads perceived that while the issue of gender balance was generally supported, it could be a sensitive topic. This was often related to the issue of fairness. Some department heads said that if they stressed gender balance too much, this would make employees nervous about being bypassed or treated unfairly.

> If (…) there are seniors who believe their candidates have become bypassed or treated unfairly that creates concern. And that is why it is totally mistaken to do this on the departmental level. (Uni 2)

The department head quoted here was frustrated because the local leaders were the ones who had to face distress and concern among the employees, and that a clearer and less ambiguous voice from the leadership would have been helpful.

Another department head said he deliberately kept a low profile when he tried to recruit women, and sometimes operated with a hidden agenda.

> (…) you need to do a balancing act, so that people do not get disgruntled (…) you don't have to blurt it out everywhere, even if you are committed to [gender balance]. (Uni 2)

This department head said he could operate more efficiently if he did not announce that he tried to recruit more women, but just did it. Thus, department heads perceived their academic community to predominantly value meritocracy and in a rather non-forgiving way.

> Most reactions (of scholars), the spinal reflex is that the absolutely important criteria should be professional skill, right. And that there should be no gender in that. (Uni 2)

Thus, they imagined critical voices from colleagues, accusing them of compromising scholarly quality if they stressed gender balance too much.

> (…) Perhaps some of my colleagues believe I am too focused on gender balance, and that (…) I put gender balance before scholarly quality. But I really do not. I try to say, that is not what it is about. There are excellent women out there on all levels, and they are the ones we need to get. (Uni 2)

Many department heads anticipated criticism and conflict if colleagues perceived that they were compromising the principle of meritocracy, and some also argued that it would be damaging for the women they recruited. However, they also considered this argument as too rigid or misunderstood. Some argued that looking to hire women was not necessarily compromising the goal of hiring 'the best'. Rather, hiring women was or could be equivalent with hiring excellence, because excellent women were 'out there'. Others also described how the merit systems were skewed in favour men, as for instance in a department of philosophy where only certain male dominated journals were given special weight in hiring procedures.

So, even though most department heads dismissed the idea that gender balance measures would compromise meritocracy, they believed they had to negotiate critical and concerned voices from the academic community which made them cautious and hesitant about announcing their work with gender balance measures too much.

To sum up, even if department heads emphasized that there was much support for gender balance as a policy goal, they anticipated criticism and concern from colleagues, employees and other members of the academic community if they were to appear too concerned with gender balance. While they themselves dismissed this concern, it needed to be handled. Some dealt with it by operating covertly with a 'hidden agenda', camouflaging their attempts to hire women. Some dismissed demands of excellence from above more openly and insisted that they would prioritize what was best for their department, which could to recruit for example someone who were good at teaching. Some called for the leadership to take more responsibility for example demanding clearer and less ambiguous messages about gender balance and what to prioritize in recruitment processes, which would allow them space to enact measures to improve the gender balance.

Voices from the women

A third set of voices department heads negotiated were from women who were possible recipients of affirmative actions and/or in recruitment positions. While women were of course part of the academic community, their voices were invoked and given weight in the discussion of gender balance measures.

One such voice perceived to be coming from women recruits was saying that they were hesitant to pursue an academic career because academia entailed a precarious work situation and required international mobility.

(…) it seems as if [temporary positions] is a larger challenge for women. Perhaps because they have a greater need for safety. I don't know what lies behind, but I do see that more [women] are dropping out. (Uni 2)

To recruit more women to a job in academia was considered difficult. Moreover, the heavy workload was perceived to make academia less attractive to women. This was a voice coming from women already in permanent positions.

(…) I get a lot of feedback from particularly women in this department, that they are uncertain if an academic career is something they will recommend to other women, since the workload is so substantial. (Uni 2)

Knowing that women may carry heavy loads of 'community work', and what is also referred to as 'academic housework' (Guarino and Borden 2017; Macfarlane and Burg 2019), which includes service, administration and support for students and colleagues, many heads described how they were trying to negotiate with women and help them prioritize merited tasks (e.g. publishing). The workload of committee work that was imposed on women because of the demand for gender balance was also mentioned frequently as a voice from women employees.

Another voice from women frequently invoked was one that expressed reluctance about gender balance measures. It was emphasized that women sometimes would argue against gender balance measures because it would make them think they were recruited because of their gender.

I think no one wants to be recruited because they are a woman or a man or whatever. They want to be recruited because they are perceived as good. (Uni 3)

This was a dilemma department heads had faced when they tried to recruit more women. One department head referred to voices from women in the early stages of their careers who expressed reluctance to apply for women-only funding and being unwilling to talk about gender biases.

> I try to get people to apply, because we have a pretty good pot of money this year to work with gender equality, and I tried to get people to apply. But there was not a great zeal (...), so I went directly to women postdocs (...). But they are also a bit cautious, they do not really want to talk about gender balance. (...) It seems that (...), especially for younger woman, you do not want to profile yourself as a women's advocate. (Uni 4)

It has been a common finding that many women are hesitant towards or negative to gender balance measures because they risk being considered as not competitive enough, and particularly in a meritocracy like academia (Liff and Cameron 1997, Peterson 2015). This was a dilemma that department heads had to handle in our study. As showed in a previous quote above, department heads were aware of the fallacy of gender balance measures women may experience, where they could face suspicion of not being chosen based on merit. One department head had also experienced the dilemma that a woman employee eligible for promotion did not want to apply for promotion. She said she was simply not interested. However, the department head's stance on the matter was that this was unacceptable and that all employees had an obligation to apply for promotion to become a professor.

> We have a woman who is approaching professorship, but does not want to apply, she thinks it's her personal choice. And I have been adamant that it is not. The only choice she has is the timeline, the sooner the better. (Uni 4)

In this case, the department head had to negotiate between the political issue of getting more women professors and employees' right to make their own career choices.

To sum up, the department heads perceived voices of reluctance from of women when it came to gender balance measures, especially the affirmative action kind. While this was understandable from the department heads points of view, it also represented a dilemma and challenge for them in their attempt to improve the gender balance. Moreover, some women were described as unruly, by refusing to advance or apply for funding. Thus, the department heads needed to negotiate between the need to persuade women to partake in gender balance work or to respect their voices and pursue other less visible avenues to improve the gender balance.

Conclusion: enacting gender balance policies while navigating ambiguous and concerned voices

In this paper we asked how department heads respond to gender balance policies and how they understand their role and others when trying to enact such policies. Previous studies on department heads' strategies in other contexts have found that they to a large extent resist taking ownership of enacting gender equality in academia. Department heads in our study did not resist such ownership, but rather perceived gender balance as an important goal, and some expressed frustration for what they perceived as barriers to making changes. This may be interpreted as an outcome of a national and institutional

governance settings that have been successful in persuading local leaders of the importance of gender balance and providing gender knowledge (Cavaghan 2013, 2017). However, was this commitment just an expression of leadership ambitions and thus merely paying 'lip service' to a discourse that was imposed upon them? Clearly, the level of engagement and commitment varied between department heads, but many did 'walk the talk' by being both active and proactive. The challenge many department heads expressed was how to legitimize actions for improving gender balance while navigating contradictory and ambiguous voices.

We found three sets of voices that the department heads had to navigate. One set was leadership voices which were authoritative and demanded department heads improve the gender balance. These voices were on the one hand considered helpful, because they legitimized enacting gender balance measures. On the other hand, they were ambiguous and blurred, signalling contradictory priorities. The authoritative voice demanding excellence was perceived as the loudest and reinforced the idea of meritocracy which made it difficult to legitimize gender balance measures because it was seen by others as compromising to this meritocratic system. Moreover, it was not clear how merit was supposed to be defined and calculated; thus it remained an ambiguous concept. Simultaneously, department heads encountered voices of concern and resistance from employees afraid to be bypassed and from 'the academic community', also about meritocracy. In addition, women employees were sometimes also hesitant to be subjects of gender balance measures because it could potentially make them be suspected of not being good enough. Thus, a dissonant landscape of conflicting voices make department heads thread carefully . This lead to fragmented efforts in improving the gender balance.

Still, our findings are more optimistic than much previous research. Rather than being resistant, the department heads were hesitant and careful. There is thus a considerable space for university leadership to better facilitate department heads efforts. Less ambiguity about priorities would have benefitted department heads by providing more authority and legitimacy. This would make it easier to handle voices of concern and resistance from employees and it would help department heads to destabilize a one-dimensional and simplistic view of meritocracy and support alternative and more constructive interpretations of gender balance policies.

Moreover, our findings also indicate that there is a need to work on collective renegotiation of the norms and values of academia. This is an important leadership and policy task. Discourses of gender balance and gender knowledge among department head suggests that national, institutional, and local policy work may have worked to some extent to produce legitimization and research-based gender knowledge (Cavaghan 2013). However, the challenge is to implement policies on local levels. It is crucial that leadership assigning the responsibilities for gender balance change to the department heads also provide the necessary space, authority and legitimacy to enact change.

Notes

1. Act relating to equality and a prohibition against discrimination (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act): https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2017-06-16-51 (retrieved 21.12.20).

2. Award letters to universities and colleges: https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokument/dep/kd/anbud-konsesjoner-og-brev/brev/utvalgte_brev/2020/tildelingsbrev-til-universiteter-og-hoyskoler-2020/id2671062/ (retrieved 29.04.2021).
3. KiF committee: http://kifinfo.no/en/content/committee-gender-balance-and-diversity-research-kif-0 (retrieved 21.12.20).
4. Balanse programme: https://www.forskningsradet.no/siteassets/programmer/programplaner/balanse-work-program.pdf (retrieved 21.12.20).

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