

## **Gender quotas for agricultural boards: Changing constructions of gender?**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the processes by which gender is given meaning through social interaction in boardrooms. In Norway, alongside mandatory quotas regulating the composition of Public Limited Corporate boards, voluntary quotas were designed to increase women's membership on the boards of agricultural cooperatives. This radical step to secure a minimum of 40 percent women makes these boards an interesting site for investigating the construction of gender in a traditionally male-dominated organization. In the debate, arguments in favour of a quota accentuated diversity and differences between women's and men's competences, opinions and values. The analysis of interview data from four agricultural cooperatives' boards suggests that equal representation is a muted, taken-for-granted value. Equality and diversity are not understood as incompatible ideas, and gender is produced dynamically through practice rather than constituted as an inherent, fixed attribute. Gender as difference is less pervasive than expected since women tend to be recognized as belonging to the gender-neutral category of a board representative despite any recognized differences. The study demonstrates that voluntary quotas may change the context and both challenge old assumptions and promote new understandings of gender in local situations.

Keywords: Quota legislation, gender equality, diversity, agricultural industries, Norway

## Introduction

International comparisons of gender equality consistently show Nordic countries to be among the most progressive (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2011). As Skjeie and Teigen (2005) have pointed out, Norwegian leaders frequently frame progress with regard to gender equality as linear and gradual. This incrementalist discourse of a journey toward equality aided by the state (Freidenvall, Dahlerup and Skjeie, 2006) frequently refers to areas of society that have a ‘long way to go’ or are ‘lagging behind’, but in which gender equality is considered within reach. High-level positions in private businesses seem more likely to be based on qualifications, experience, and performance than positions in the primary and secondary sectors; mining, agriculture and construction have relatively few and often marginalized women leaders (Pini, 2008; McDonald, Pini and Mayes, 2012).

One of the most prominent recent measures to promote gender equality is the passage and enforcement of the 2006 law requiring a minimum of 40 percent of each sex on Public Limited Corporate (PLC) boards (Teigen, 2012; Sørensen, 2013). This article examines the construction of gender on the boards of Norwegian agricultural cooperatives. These boards were not initially subject to the gender quota law, but in 2004 the Federation of Norwegian Agricultural Cooperatives (FNAC) voluntarily decided to have a 40 percent minimum representation of women on its boards by 2009.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the average representation of women in agricultural boards increased from 17 percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2009 (Bjørkhaug, 2011a). This shift

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<sup>1</sup> The quota initiative was initially introduced on a voluntary basis in 2004, and better gender balance was soon achieved. On that basis, the FNAC argued in public hearings that a quota law was not necessary (Ot. prp. nr. 21, 2006–2007: point 10.2.2:160). Nonetheless, gender balance requirements were introduced in the new law on cooperatives in 2008, with implementation by January 1, 2012.

resembles the success rate achieved by quota regulations in other industries (Statistics Norway, 2014).

FNAC represents one of Norway's largest industries both financially and in number of employees and one of its most male-dominated sectors. Its senior management consists almost exclusively of men; only 6 percent of top managers are women. Men are also heavily over-represented at the grassroots level; only 10 percent of the members of local producer committees are women (Bjørkhaug, 2011b). Cooperative organizations have a tradition of direct representation; members are elected to the board at annual membership meetings. The boards we studied were made up mostly of farmers who belong to the cooperatives (called owners) and of employee representatives.<sup>2</sup>

FNAC's decision to implement a gender quota voluntarily was given strong impetus by gender equality politics in Norway. The agricultural industry has been aware of its pervasive gender inequality and has worked actively to recruit women. Although this awareness may have prompted the decision to adopt gender quotas, criticisms of the image of a male-dominated, old-fashioned industry and efforts to improve public perceptions may also have contributed to it (Bjørkhaug and Sørensen, 2012). Such a radical step to remedy the gender imbalance in a male-dominated industry provides an interesting case for investigation. This study investigates how board members in a sample of these organizations construct and interpret gender.

The article first situates this study in research on gender in agricultural organizations, which has identified great challenges to achieving gender equality. Then it considers the introduction of quotas as a means to ensure gender equality. Public debates that focused on their

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<sup>2</sup> Norwegian law requires companies with more than 30 employees to have employee representatives on their boards if employees demand it. The number of employee representatives increases with company size. This law applies to cooperative boards as well (Law on cooperatives, Chapter 6 § 67). These board members are elected by employees.

business advantages influenced the FNAC's decision to adopt them (Bjørkhaug and Sørensen, 2012). Feminist scholars have theorized gender difference in various ways and pointed to the dynamic relationships among the concepts 'difference', 'diversity' and 'similarity'. This framework is used in the subsequent empirical analysis of 1) ideas regarding women's and men's competences, 2) discourses of gender and 3) gender practices in the boardroom. These three topics are used to glean how board members made sense of gender in everyday discourse and practice.

### **Gender in agricultural organisations**

A substantial body of research has concentrated on male dominance as a source of privilege and power in organizations (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Keerfoot and Knights, 1993; Keerfoot and Knights, 1998). Historically and culturally, agricultural organizations have been structured in ways that have secured men's dominance (Alston, 2000; Pini, 2008). This inequality has been documented not only in Australia but also worldwide (Pini, 2008). Accounts of women's participation in these organizations have emphasised their absence from or marginalization within farmers' unions (Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Pini, 2008; Brandth, Follo, and Haugen, 2015), in agricultural cooperatives (Meistad, 1993; Verstad, 1995), and in the agricultural media (Liepins, 1996; Brandth and Haugen, 1998). These organizations are portrayed as patriarchal, hierarchical and resistant to female participation.

Pini (2008) presented a strong critique of the discourses and ideologies through which managerial farming men legitimate and reproduce their organizational power. Farm organizations have been called an 'old boys' network' that protects the existing culture and regards women in

managerial positions as ‘the third sex’ (Pini, 2005). This masculine culture represents a strong barrier against the participation of women. A study of Norwegian dairy cooperatives in the early 1990s described how women board members coped with their position (Meistad, 1993). The inclusion of a few women in existing organizations proved to be an arduous and frustrating process, especially for the women themselves. As research has shown, it is men who have been positioned as political actors, while women have had great difficulties obtaining positions of influence within such organizations (Pini, 2005).

In her study Verstad (1995) explored how Norwegian dairy cooperatives dealt with the issue of gender equality. In terms of organizational rhetoric women and men were regarded as equally vital resources, but the resources they represented were not seen as similar or equally valuable to the board. What women represented in terms of values, abilities and ways of thinking differed from the masculine standards that characterized the organization. The issue revealed double standards that were founded in the conflicts between a patriarchal agricultural ideology and a modern societal ideology of gender equality.

Verstad (1995) dealt with a situation where women were in the minority, and feminist research has suggested that a minority position makes women more visible as a particular category (Brandth, Follo, and Haugen, 2015). This situation has been considered a trap when it comes to gender equality (Eduards, 2001). According to Moi (2004), a focus on women’s particularity may imprison them in their gender category as they will always be regarded as *women* representatives. For instance, when women and their opinions are described as something particular, something that is different from the ostensibly generic but actually male viewpoint, they are accorded much less authority.

Studies of gender in agricultural organizations on the management level are still in an embryonic stage (Pini, 2008). In seeking to contribute to this literature, this article has drawn inspiration from research on assumptions about the kinds of competence that are required in farming. Legitimizing male dominance, farmers tend to ascribe different abilities and interests to women and men (Heggem, 2014). Drawing on Solheim's (2002) claim that competence connected to particular persons is one of the most important elements in the construction of gender hierarchies, Heggem (2014) demonstrates how this plays out in farmers' construction of gender and may work to exclude women from the industry. Solheim's (2002, p. 116) term 'hegemonic gender power' describes the hierarchical ranking of competence, skills and knowledge attributed to women and men. The dominant competence in agriculture is understood as masculine (Heggem, 2014). The agricultural business sector objected to gender quotas for corporate boards because its male leaders anticipated difficulties in recruiting sufficiently qualified women.

In the organizations we studied women are not a minority on the boards, but more or less equally represented. This situation is an important new context for investigation. In contrast to research describing male dominance, privilege and power, this article investigates a boardroom situation characterized by virtually equal representation. A key question in this article is how hierarchical notions of gendered competence that existed when women were a minority are altered by this new situation of numerical equality.

### **From gender equality to gender diversity**

Legally binding regulatory measures designed to achieve balanced representation are characteristic of Norwegian gender equality policies (Teigen, 2003; Casey, Skibnes and Pringle, 2011). This new quota-based law has become a critical consideration for corporate businesses, and its legally binding nature has made Norway's approach markedly different from that of other countries. A company that fails to reach 40 per cent representation of each gender on the board can ultimately be sanctioned with its forced dissolution (Teigen, 2008, p. 6). Underrepresentation of women is considered undemocratic, and gender quotas for representation on public and political bodies have consequently become more commonplace in other countries as well (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005; Dahlerup, 2008).

The quota law for PLC boards was passed after prolonged debate and intense resistance. Many critics described it as yet another state intervention in private business that was involuntary and coercive. In addition, the business sector worried that it would be impossible to find sufficiently qualified women and argued that women recruited via the quota system might lack relevant experience and be defined as secondary. Arguments in favour of the quota emphasized its potential business benefits (Sørensen, 2011; Sørensen, 2013), particularly that promoting women would make more effective use of a broader spectrum of abilities. More inclusive boards would improve companies' decision-making processes and thus yield competitive advantages and increased profitability. The dominance of this economic advantage in the arguments for a quota system contributed to the emergence of the buzzword 'diversity'. In explaining how quotas could benefit business, the debate emphasized utilizing diverse competences. While the democratic aspect of gender equity was dominant in the initial political discourse (Sørensen, 2013), the economic rationale increasingly served as the main argument for a quota system (Rönblom, 2008). Sørensen (2013, p. 153) has pointed to the paradox that feminist arguments were not used

in Norway's most recent gender equality reform. The success of the concept 'diversity' in this debate triggered our interest in exploring how gender is understood at the level of the boardroom.

This shift away from reasoning based on equity towards emphasizing the business advantages of diversity has occurred in other European countries as well. Internationally, there is a growing tendency to employ the term 'diversity' in the context of equality-related initiatives (Bacchi and Eveline, 2009). 'Diversity' has become a rhetorical substitute for 'equality' in response to what has been described as 'equity fatigue' (Ahmed, 2007). While the term 'equality' is often deleted from documents, 'diversity management' has been substituted for 'affirmative action' because it is perceived as less controversial (Basset-Jones, 2005; Gatrell and Swan, 2008). Diversity management as part of human resource management is thought to confer competitive advantages. Critical studies have found that although diversity management leads to a greater heterogeneity among people in an organization, it does not substantially alter the organization's structure or norms. Rather, it tends to reinforce differences in terms of identities and power (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2006). The term 'diversity' invokes difference. Arguments for gender diversity conceptualize women and men as having different values, interests, experiences and priorities, and consequently, expect them to provide different perspectives and solutions.

One of the central themes of feminist theory that bears on gender quotas concerns the construction and meaning of gender (Dahlerup, 2008). Since the quota regulation was introduced to ensure gender-balanced recruitment to central positions of governance, we believe it is important to study both how gender is understood and how those meanings help us to understand the implications of women's position in organizations. This article investigates how gender is constructed in discourse and practices in the boardrooms of agricultural cooperatives.

## **Feminist theories of difference and similarity**

To empirically capture constructions of gender in terms of equality and difference we draw on feminist theory. A central dividing line in feminist thought is whether to regard women and men as different or similar (Scott, 1988). Discussing the question of whether women's citizenship should be based on their distinct characteristics or on their similarity with men, Pateman (1989) has described this as Wollstonecraft's dilemma: both rationales for citizenship subjugate women in a patriarchal society. The quest for 'similarity' can lead to women being measured according to a male standard, while arguments from 'difference' enable them to be excluded and disqualified. Haavind (2000) points out that difference has two dimensions, segregation and hierarchization, but she thinks that seeing the two genders as different without ranking one above the other is virtually impossible. That is, when women are defined as different from men, they are almost unavoidably subordinated. One of our concerns in the empirical analysis is the extent to which difference between men and women also implies a ranking of them.

The two corollary theses in feminist thought are the erasure of difference and the valorization of difference. Both are rooted in the modernist epistemology of gendered dichotomies. This dualism of sameness vs. difference has been challenged in the literature (Heckman, 1999). A third thesis that has become dominant implies a paradigm shift from focusing on how women differ *from* men to an exploration of differences *among* women and *among* men (Heckman, 1999). This stance allows us to analyze how diversity in such dimensions as sexuality, class and ethnicity intersects with gender (Acker, 2006; de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2004). A fourth way to theorize gender difference is to deal with differences *within* the subject

(Braidotti, 2003). The subject ‘woman’ may hold several meanings simultaneously; she may be both the minority ‘other’ and integrated within the majority (Braidotti 2003, p. 48).

As Braidotti put it (2003, p. 48), it is feminism’s unaccomplished task to ensure equality ‘in and through the respect for difference and diversity’. Equality need not imply ignoring differences. According to binary thinking, equality and difference seem incompatible. Solheim (2008), however, upholds the idea that equality and diversity deal with different principles at different levels of meaning. Equality implies a focus on what is common, while diversity emphasizes what is particular and distinct. According to Solheim, equality means that we are able to establish certain common features despite the differences we experience. Gender differences do not disappear, but they exist on a level of meaning where they do not count. Diversity is about seeking out, protecting and cultivating differences, while equality focuses on what can be made universal (Solheim, 2008). Nevertheless, there is no necessary or absolute opposition between them. Neither equality nor diversity is a positive or valuable concept in itself; their significance depends on what is seen as equal or diverse. These various ways of conceptualizing gender difference and equality serve as analytical devices in the analysis.

Empirical studies of gender have increasingly focused on its dynamics rather than treating it as fixed or essential in nature. A discursive approach to gender dynamics focuses on how gender is constructed in talk and text. Everyday talk refers to both difference and sameness (Nentwich, 2006). Many constructions and meanings of gender equality and diversity are at play simultaneously. These are not exclusive, but can stand side by side; everyday talk is contradictory by nature (Nentwich, 2006, p. 504).

Feminist theory has conceptualized gender as practice or ‘doing’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This approach emphasises the particular context or institutional norms that provide a

repertoire of practices and help determine gender conduct. How gender is done changes over time and varies with location and context. In this way, West and Zimmerman conceive of gender as a characteristic of social situations. Since the quota has created a new social situation in boardrooms, we explore how board members through talk and practice construct gender in terms of equality, diversity, difference, and similarities.

## **Data and methodology**

The analysis of gendered meanings in boardrooms is based on an empirical study of members of the boards of four cooperatives that represent different branches of the agricultural industry.<sup>3</sup> The responsibility of these boards is to run companies in accordance with legal and regulatory requirements and with decisions made at the cooperatives' annual meetings. Boards decide company strategies and economic matters as well as appointing CEOs.

Fieldwork was carried out in 2008 and 2009. The interviewers observed two meetings of each board, which normally lasted a full working day. All members of the individual boards attended the meetings (see table 1 for numbers). We conducted in-depth interviews with all individual board members in between these meetings. The majority of interviews were held at the interviewees' home, office, or premises near the board meetings, although a few had to be conducted by phone. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were all digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

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<sup>3</sup> The Federation of Norwegian Cooperatives includes such industries as dairy, eggs, meat, breeding, forestry, horticulture, grain, and the supply of inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides.

The interviews provided insights into individuals' experiences and their understandings of gender in the context of the boardroom, while the observations of the meetings enabled us to obtain an understanding of board members' behaviors and the dynamics of their interactions. Although specific episodes could have been identified and discussed in the context of this study, observational data were not recorded and, consequently, the analysis presents quotations drawn from the interview data.

While the goal of 40 percent of female board membership has been achieved, this only applies to those members elected by owners. Many FNAC companies do aim to achieve a better gender balance among their employees, but male employees predominate in most of them and mandatory quotas do not apply to the representatives they elect. Reflecting this fact, the sample is comprised of 13 women and 22 men. Two of the board chairs were men and two were women. All vice-chairs were men. Just under half (44 percent) of owner-elected members were women, while three-quarters (eight out of ten) employee-elected members were men. Table 1 shows the distribution of women and men in different roles on the four boards.

**<Put Table 1 here.>**

The board members' ages ranged from 39 to 65 years; the average ages of women and men were 47 and 52 respectively. Most board members were married and had children, with an average of 2.5 children for men and 2.7 for women in these boards.<sup>4</sup> Women board members had higher levels of formal education; 3 out of 4 had a college or university degree, while 1 out of 4 men had higher education degrees. Most of the owner-elected board members were full-time farmers, although some also had second jobs. While members are elected every second year, it is

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<sup>4</sup> The fertility rate is higher than the Norwegian average of 1.78 for women and 1.61 for men (SSB, 2015)

common to be reelected for a second term. Those whom we interviewed had held their positions for periods varying from 1 to 9 years, with an average of 4.3 years, and both men and women were represented among the more experienced. Without risk of violating our subjects' anonymity, data was recorded in a way which enabled us to identify on which board particular members served, as well as their gender and their professional roles.

Our first step in the analytic process was to explore the meaning of 'diversity'. In the interview data, repeated talk of difference and similarity appeared to be so salient that the relationship between these ideas became the central question in our analysis. We employed the theoretical concepts of diversity, difference and similarity as our analytic lenses. Analyzing interviews as a form of linguistic representation is based on an understanding of gender as a discursive construction. Working conceptions of gender in the boardrooms of the agricultural cooperatives were treated as articulations of circulating discourses of gender and quota laws in Norwegian society.

First, given the gendered structure of agricultural competence, we explore how men's and women's background competences were assessed. Next we focus on the normative ideals of gender equality articulated through their views on the quota and its impact. Finally we consider meanings of gender difference and similarity based on board members' observations about each other's practices in the boardroom. Throughout the analysis, we focus on the various meanings of gender and being a board-member.

### **The hegemony of male competence**

The availability of diverse competences was central in the public debate on the quota system, so we start the analysis by exploring how women's and men's different competences were understood in gendered terms. Women board members have less industry-specific competence but greater competence in terms of higher education and off-farm employment. Women's professional background and knowledge tend to compensate for their lack of farming experience. A male employee representative (Board 2) explained:

All of the representatives on the board, who are men and have been there for a long time, are farmers. . . . Women on our board are of course owners, but they have other skills and slightly different backgrounds, . . . so they are not as well acquainted with the tasks, I think, in all ways. . . . It takes them longer for them to get into the issues dealt with by this board because they have not been active in production themselves.

This board member argued that women are different from men, and he discretely downgraded women because they are not farmers with practical experience and interest in matters that are brought to the board by the local producer committees. The specific importance placed on farming skills rather than education was noticeable in all of the boards. Male owner representatives in particular tended to regard farm competence and experience in farm organizations as a more important qualification than academic credentials. By far the most highly valued knowledge was acquired through being a full-time farmer and participating in local organizational activities. Like farming, agricultural organizations at the local level are male-dominated. This emphasis on merits of farming is a way in which male farmers legitimate and reproduce their organizational power, as Pini (2008) also found. It helps to maintain the existing

male-dominated culture in which women supposedly lack what has traditionally been seen as the most important qualification.

Apart from male hegemonic competence, the most common route of entry into boards for farmer-owners has been through organizational activity in the local cooperative. ‘Having climbed the necessary steps of the ladder’, as one participant put it, is highly valued. More men than women have been active at the local level simply because most farmers are men. Since few women have similarly long experience in farm organizations, they have had to climb ‘a steeper career ladder’ to attain board level positions. This tends to be frowned upon particularly by the men. Women representatives are more often part-time farmers, frequently in combination with agriculture-related administrative occupations, and have entered the boards by an altogether different route. While men speak of being promoted on the basis of merit, some women say they became a member of the board “almost by coincidence”; they had not planned for such a career. Men’s and women’s differently valued competences and pathways to power suggest that both segregating and hierarchizing gender principles are at play. In bringing other working life experiences into the boardroom, however, women provide the diversity that the organization seeks. As we go onto show, this diversity may contribute to a change in the way the board members understand gender.

### **Equal representation means diversity**

Since the main argument for introducing quotas was to obtain diversity for the benefit of business, feminist arguments were strikingly absent from the debates on the national political

level (Teigen, 2008; Sørensen, 2013). We now consider how gender equality figured in board members' vocabulary when discussing the quota.

In response to being asked about their opinions on the quota, board members said that equal representation of men and women was an important ideal in its own right and linked this principle to the introduction of the quota. No one disputed gender equality as a goal. Opinions differed, however, with regard to the quota as a means of reaching equal representation. An employee-elected man (Board 1) summed up this view by saying: 'Everybody agrees that both men and women should be represented, but all of us do not completely agree on the way to achieve it.'

Board members' assessments of the quota provide insights into their understandings of gender. One of the owner-elected women (Board 1) argued that

people are different and we need different types on the board. It can be a bit too safe and easy if there are only men or only women. I think that in order to contribute to diversity in the boardroom, it is a precondition that both genders are present.

This argument favours the representation of both men and women in terms of diversity. She emphasized both gender equality and having 'different types' represented, which means diversity. In her view, gender difference implies that men and women contributed differently and made discussions more challenging.

A man who served as chair (Board 2) elaborated this point of view:

Why do we need quotas? It's because I want to have women on the board, to have diversity and to have their approach to an issue. In several cases women do have different approaches, other values, and some other thoughts. . . . This makes me certain that we will reach the right decisions if both genders are represented somewhat equally.

His argument echoes the contention that recruiting women to the board means diversity, which is an advantage for business decisions. Understanding women as different from men in the way they think and in their values and interests, he justified more equal representation as offering different gendered approaches. As previous research has pointed out, however, difference often means hierarchy. In this board member's argument women's difference was not a reason to downgrade or exclude their viewpoints but rather a necessary asset to ensure that the board made qualitatively good decisions.

Even when women's non-farm backgrounds were frowned upon and their other forms of competence were not as highly valued as practical farm experience, people still argued strongly and persistently that cooperative organizations needed to recruit women in order to access their specific competences. A man who served as chair (Board 2) expressed this idea:

If we [the cooperative boards] don't make ourselves attractive to women, we will lose them. Then some other organization gets the benefit of their competence, and this is something our organization cannot bear—being unable to recruit from 100 percent of the population.

His argument presumes that the company might lose competitive advantage if it does not recruit women to the board. He was also concerned about the image of the agricultural industry based on the notion that its farmer board members were ‘not particularly willing to change, stubborn, grey men in their fifties’. He thought that the recruitment of women would convey a more modern impression of the agricultural sector. The common discourse, which took male dominance in agriculture into account, held that companies adhering to strict gender categories and the ‘othering’ of women might make themselves uninteresting for potential women representatives. Well-educated women might choose organizations where they were given better opportunities and working conditions. In changing the gender composition of the board, voluntary quotas seem to have transformed board members’ ideas of the most valued competence. Gender as hierarchy is being weakened.

Equity arguments are taken for granted and expressed in terms of equal representation; no one expresses opposition to that. But the data demonstrates that gender equality is a complex idea that includes difference as diversity. In the next section we turn from the discursive level to the ways in which the board members make sense of gender differences and similarities in actual boardroom behavior.

### **How is gender difference and similarity done in the boardroom?**

The perspective on ‘doing gender’ that we adopted posits that women and men are understood through what they are seen doing in their work practices, styles of communication, and interactions with others. Board members make sense of difference and sameness by their observations of the ways in which women and men go about its business.

*Attributing similar and different practices to both women and men*

One of the men we interviewed (vice chair, Board 1) regarded gender as evident in men's and women's ways of acting:

No, actually there are no differences [between women and men on the board]. We have many of the same qualities, only *different ways of showing them*. Women are not as decisive and bombastic, but more inquiring, listening and sensitive than we are. But, at the same time, I think they are just as good and positive contributors as we are.

He was struggling to combine the presumption of equality as similarity with his observations of gender differences. Interestingly, this man did not base his views on an innate, essentialist definition of women or on a binary difference between men and women, but attributed the differences to women's and men's behaviour. Men and women shared many qualities but practiced them differently. This perspective sees gender as dynamic in terms of 'doing', not something that is accomplished once and for all (Kvande, 2007; Brandth and Haugen, 2010). However, as will be further demonstrated below, systematically generalizing and associating different practices with women than with men, suggests a certain social essentialism. It does not establish or presume a gender hierarchy as women's practices are defined, not as less valuable, but simply as different from and, optimally, complementary to those of men. Women's different ways of doing are equally valued.

An owner-elected man (Board 1) observed that, while women and men in the boardroom sometimes went about things in the same way, differences that legitimized diversity continued to exist. ‘We have the same objectives . . . , and I think that the women we have with us are tough as well. But, of course, women are seen as having different personalities, and that creates diversity.’ Here, too, the discourses of similarity and difference are employed simultaneously. There is no either/or.

It was quite common for the board members we interviewed to normatively deny the existence of gender differences but go right on to describe such differences in actual behavior. Similarity and difference are not always mutually exclusive; they are at play at the same time in the context of the boardroom and do not have to be dissolved (cf. Nentwich, 2006). One of the owner-elected men (Board 3) expressed the typical ways in which men were seen as acting differently than women:

Men probably come to conclusions more quickly. . . . I think women are better at reflecting, better at analyzing. I think men are more macho in the moment of decision. If we make the wrong decision there is always a new board meeting. I think women on boards are more reflective and might frame a decision differently, with other premises, and maybe a bit closer to the target.

Another way in which women’s and men’s professional doings were seen as different is that women are more willing to expose gaps in their knowledge. An owner-elected woman (Board 1) stated that ‘women are better at asking questions. Men will rarely reveal that they do not know things.’ An owner-elected man described women board members as ‘very well-versed persons,

asking questions and being just as tough' (Board 2). This quality seems to be highly valued in decision-making and thought of as normal for men but also attainable by women.

Women were also seen as presenting issues in a less confrontational, softer way. For instance, several members of different boards said that after a woman was elected chair communication had changed for the better (Boards 1 and 4). An employee-elected man (Board 1) said: 'It is clear that . . . some women are more reserved, just as some men are, and they may be better at listening, but I cannot say that I see differences between men and women.' The capacity to generate action, however, was linked to men. In other words, gender was understood as a question of different styles of communication and decision-making.

Board members described gender differences in style and methods of work, but they did not see either women or men as doing a better or poorer job than the other gender. A male chair (Board 2) explained:

There are no great differences between boys and girls in the boardroom . . . judging from the resolutions, but, then again, there are gender differences in many ways. . . . Women are more thorough. They are better prepared. You never see a woman opening the envelope with the documents for the first time at the meeting, but you see some men doing that. You might say that the quality of their preparation is dependent upon the distance from the parking lot, so that they have time to flick through the documents.

Preparing for a meeting involves reading the agenda and its assignments, getting to know the cases, and preparing arguments for discussion. Being well prepared is perceived as more common for women than for men, an observation that is supported by a study of Scandinavian women

corporate board members (Huse and Solberg, 2006). Not being well prepared is a risk for women, as it may damage their reputation as qualified board members. Accordingly, women regarded their effort as essential for making positive contributions to the board. At the same time, men's tendency to neglect their 'homework' was not negatively reported. This difference seems to confirm an underlying masculine agricultural style, which is not devalued in light of diversity. Not criticizing or downgrading men's undesirable behavior is perhaps one way male hegemony continues to exist.

### *De-emphasizing gender difference*

Variations within gender categories are an additional aspect of diversity in the boardroom. Interestingly, the representatives recognized differences among women and among men and stressed that there is no one way of being a woman or a man. One of several owner-elected women on her cooperative's board (Board 3) linked this insight to equal representation. She had served both on boards where she was the only woman and on boards with several women. 'A woman is not a woman', she claimed arrestingly, and explained:

When there are more women [on a board] men learn that we are just as different as men when it comes to priorities, ways of thinking and approaches. This is the most equilibrating aspect of having many women on the board; you are spared from being associated with the stereotypical expectations of a female representative.

She argued that there is more room for women ‘to be themselves’ if there are many women on the board. This conclusion resonates with Kanter’s (1977) theory of tokenism, which identified being in a minority position as the primary cause of gender discrimination in the workplace. According to this experienced board member, not being in a minority position makes it possible to disagree with other women without women being identified as their ‘own worst enemies’. The new boardroom context formed by the quota regulation generates more varied understandings of gender. Gender identity does not always overrule their identity as a representative.

On the basis of their observations in the boardroom, members shared an understanding that gender made no difference in decision-making. An owner-elected man explained: ‘We deal with the same issues anyway, . . . and it has not affected voting in that men have voted for one result and women for another.’ (Board 2). Differences between men and women were not seen as influencing their opinions on issues. One of the owner-elected women (Board 2) said ‘I cannot see what it has to do with my gender.’ In their capacity as owners’ representatives, board members are expected to act on behalf of the best interests of agriculture and the cooperative rather than their gender.

Interestingly, virtually equal representation seems to influence the definition of gender. One of the owner-elected men (Board 2) said:

I don’t even think about the fact that they are women. What is important is not their gender, but that they are interested in the issues. . . . I don’t think the women who are on the board have any characteristics that the men don’t have, and likewise I don’t think the men have any other qualities than the women. I see them as *representatives*.

This view might mean that women are accepted into the universal category of board representative. According to Moi (2004) it is when women are accepted both as women and as representatives of the universal category that gender equality is attained. By itself, this man's statement does not mean that equality has been achieved, however; he may simply be voicing a view that he regards as normative in Norwegian society.

Summing up, we see that in some doings, such as voting, gender differences seem irrelevant, but in others, such as preparation for meetings, they are conspicuous. Based on their observation of boardroom practices, the people we interviewed defined gender as both similarity and difference. While confirming a basic gender similarity, they simultaneously observed gender differences in such practices as styles of work and communication. Since these understandings are present simultaneously, we recognize that gender similarity and difference are not mutually exclusive understandings but rather a constant tension inherent in the everyday meanings of gender. Moreover, differences are remarked not only between women and men but also among women. Alongside the irrelevance of gender, there is room for gender neutrality.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have explored the processes by which gender is given meaning through social interaction in the boardroom. Previous research had shown that women face considerable difficulties in gaining influence in agricultural organizations. Their minority position and the dominant male culture made their difference and inferiority from men conspicuous. Against this background we asked how the quota system, with its seemingly contradictory aims of equal representation and diversity, has influenced the construction of gendered meanings on

agricultural boards. Hence the way meanings of gender are made to work is important for access to power and influence.

Based on the interviews with board members we have seen that there are certain attempts to secure a position of male dominance within the system. These efforts do not, however, seem to be particularly successful, as the arguments in favour of the quota indicate a strong motivation to change the gendering of agricultural cooperatives. Women are seen as bringing competences that enhance organizational policy, which seems to weaken the hierarchical ranking of gender and enforce a positive evaluation of women's contributions.

Moreover, equal representation of men and women is treated as an uncontested norm. Since the rationale for equal representation is to bring about a more diverse composition of the board, this topic brings us to one core conundrum of feminist theory: how to reconcile equality and difference. The data suggests that similarity and difference are not incompatible ideas and carry many meanings. The change towards numerically equal representation of men and women means that women are no longer a minority or considered 'tokens' (Kanter, 1977). Since social settings create gendered meanings and behavior, this situation of relative parity enables people to discard dichotomized gender categories and see how each includes aspects of the other.

Moreover, the analysis shows that men and women are not understood in opposition to each other. The behavior that board members observed included gender as doing difference as well as similarity, but the criteria for deciding what constitutes difference or similarity are not always clear. In some doings women and men are seen as similar, while in others differences are more conspicuous. In this way gender is produced dynamically through practice, not constituted as an inherent, fixed attribute. Board members understood similarity and difference as existing simultaneously *between* men and women and *among* women and *among* men.

Following Solheim's (2002) claim that gender might exist on a level of meaning where it is not always relevant, our data suggests that acting as a representative of the industry and voting to ensure the best interests of the organization does not always activate gender. This finding is supported by other studies (Casey, Skibnes and Pringle, 2011; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Sørensen, 2013). In the context of the quota, it is quite remarkable! In the debate leading up to the introduction of the quota, the arguments in favour of it accentuated diversity of women's and men's competences, opinions and values. Difference, however, seems to be less pervasive than previously thought. Rather, women tend to be recognized as belonging to the gender-neutral category of board representative despite any gender differences. Acker's (2006) conceptualization of 'inequality regimes' suggests that a gendered substructure is largely invisible in organizations, which promotes an appearance of gender neutrality. In a critical perspective we recommend further research to explore values regarding shared interests and assumptions about what constitutes the 'ideal representative' on agricultural cooperative boards.

This study has demonstrated that quotas may change the context and challenge old views as well as promote new understandings of gender. Agriculture has been a male-dominated industry within a society committed to gender equality. We were somewhat surprised that we did not find more discriminatory or essentialist understandings of gender among the board members we interviewed. Even in a male-dominated organizational culture new rules and practices may serve to alter gendered understandings. While the quota initiative at the top level of the agricultural sector can be considered an important step towards gender equality, its impact may be limited in scope. Quotas may lack the capacity to change the gender composition of corporate management or contribute to greater gender equality at the intermediate and local levels of agricultural organizations. Comparative studies in different organizations and types of companies

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would be valuable. Future research should also employ different methods. While we have used interview data to investigate what meanings are attributed to gender in the boardroom, extensive observational studies repeated over time may further enrich our understanding of how gender is constructed in boardrooms.

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