

From rights-based to utility-oriented equalization

Gender political discourses in Norwegian sports

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Norway is worldwide seen as a champion in gender equality. A picture mainly based on the high representation of women in the Norwegian Parliament and Cabinet. A rather equally balanced representation in the political elite has thus contributed to place Norway in the forefront concerning policies of gender equality (Teigen 2001). But does this gender balance also reflect the standards of other prestigious and traditional male-dominated institutions in Norwegian society? How is the gender-political landscape of the advancement of women in other significant and powerful Norwegian institutions developing?

In this article I will highlight some aspects of the Norwegian gender equality policy by looking at gender-political discourses within Norwegian sport. As in other modern societies, sport represents a powerful symbolic institution in Norway. In this position it reflects more general political priorities in society as a whole (Klausen 1998). My analysis of gender-political discourses in Norwegian sport will illustrate how shifting ideological climates are shaping meanings of gender, as well as how gender is made relevant in the process of policy-making. The empirical material is mostly derived from my previous studies of gender relations in sport politics (e.g. Hovden 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003). The main focus in this context will be on how discourses connected to the advancement of women in sport have been initiated, changed and underpinned. I will present arguments, theoretical assumptions and understandings underlying gender-political practices, and how these are related to contextual characteristics and generate shifts and transformations as well as restructuring and status quo.

In my introductory part I will briefly mention a few gendered patterns shaping Norwegian sport organizations today. The main part will be divided into three historical phases surrounding gender-political shifts and changes from the 1970's and onwards. In the concluding part I will analyze and reflect upon essential conditions and gender-political challenges related to the present situation. But before I move to my substantial analysis I will

very briefly clarify a few central concepts and fragments of my underlying theoretical framework.

Norwegian sport as gender-political system

The concept 'Norwegian sport' addresses in this article the organized sport system in Norway; the voluntary umbrella organization, the Norwegian Olympic Committee/ the Norwegian Confederation of Sport (NOCCS). This organization is the biggest voluntary organization in Norway and consists of 1.8 million members, organized in 57 sports federations, 19 district associations and 12.500 sport clubs (NIF/NOK 2002).

The theoretical framework underpinning my analysis is mostly based on constructs from the feminist body of research dealing with gender in sport and gender in organizations. Gender is examined as an integral part of social relations. My main focus has been on internal organizational processes in order to examine the interrelations of strategic action and structural constraints, and how understandings of gender are encapsulated in organizational processes and structures (e.g. Haavind 1989, Acker 1990, 1992, Calas & Smircich 1992, 1996, Johanessen 1994). Acker (1990) put this point of departure thus:

Gender is not an addition to those processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood without analyses of gender (Acker 1990:146).

From this approach, constructions and reconstructions of gender are seen as operating in organizational dynamics and structural tasks, positions and power. From this perspective *sport organizations are seen as gender-political systems.*

Gendered organizational patterns

To understand the development of women's sport in Norway it is important to have in mind that Norway has never had sex-segregated sports organizations (Lippe 1997). Today women account for about 38% of the memberships in the NOCCS, and this percentage have been quite stable over the last ten years (NIF/NOK 2002). However, the proportion of the female membership varies with the sport.

The organizational leadership structures have always been male dominated – and still are. Today only 7% of the presidents of sport federations are women. The numbers of women at the district and club levels are respectively 10% and 17%. (NIF/NOK 2002). The gender gap is structured by power and prestige, so that women in prestigious and powerful positions represent the exception that signalize that the opposite is the rule (Hovden 2000b). In coaching we find similar features. Nearly all coaching at the top level is performed by men. In local children's and youth sport the majority of the coaches are women (Karlsen 1995).

The statistics of gender representation in the organizational decision-making indicate, however, a more gender-balanced pattern. In the sport federations, women account for 28% of the board-members. In the district associations women possess about 40% of the elected posts (NIF/NOK 2002). This pattern indicates the effects of the law regulated gender quota in decision-making bodies of Norwegian sport. My further discussions of gender-political discourses will hopefully give a more substantial background for this paragraph as well as present some explanations of the gendered patterns mentioned.

Gender-political discourses and strategies

During the last 30 years discourses as well as strategies connected to gender and the advancement of women in Norwegian sport appear as both shifting and controversial. The main discursive features have, however, been concentrated around why women are underrepresented, excluded from higher positions and under-utilized on different organizational levels. In addition we can trace a development from rights- and justice-based gender policies towards more utility- and difference-based (Hovden 2002). According to these characteristics I have chosen to divide my analysis into three phases and time periods.

1970–1984: Formal equality and participation on equal terms

The most extensive mobilization of women into Norwegian sport organizations came in the beginning of the 1970's. The mobilization resulted in rapidly growing participation of women at all organizational levels. Several societal conditions and changes influenced this development. Among the most important were the impacts linked to a strong, expansive and active women's movement in addition to a political climate shaped by social democratic ideals. The claims were equal rights and equal possibilities for all – independent of class, geographical location and gender. The overall declared motto for organized sport was "Sport for all". Women's fight for equality in sport was shaped by liberal feminist discourses. The main objective was to achieve the same formal rights and opportunities as men, led by strategies to participate and compete according to male norms and rules. Women wanted equal treatment with men and refused social discrimination based on biological differences.

This strategy turned out to be very successful, so that at the end of the seventies – after years of protests against discrimination and claims for participation on equal terms – most sports and sports events accepted women's claims. For example the largest running relay in Norway as well as the most prestigious ski-races, which previously had been looked upon as too strenuous for women, opened their doors for female participation. In 1976 – as a result of a long and hard fight – women were included in the biggest and most prestigious male bastion of Norwegian Sport; the Norwegian Soccer Association (Lippe 1983).

However, women's increasing participation was not reflected in the proportion of female leaders or women holding honorary positions. Strategies and practices based on men's norms and standards seem to indicate a rebuilding of gendered hierarchies. Women were still found at the bottom rung. Measured with male standards and masculine norms, women were seen as a lag – as a group not possessing the "right" personal competence to compete on equal

footing (Hovden 1999, Hovden 2000b). To be found competent for leadership positions, women were expected to adapt to male attitudes and behavior and in this way learn how to compensate for their attributed deficiencies.

In the beginning of the 1980's, we can detect a growing consciousness directed towards the gendered power structures of Norwegian sport, focusing on the insufficiencies of strategies built on discourses and policies of liberal feminism and formal equality (Fasting 1984, Hovden 1989). This situation generated an ideological shift – a transition towards a new emphasis on social justice, democracy and preferential treatment to stimulate an equalization more directed towards equal outcomes.

1985–1994: Women-centered approaches with an emphasis on preferential action and equality of outcomes

The ideological changes were influenced by radical feminist discourses, which questioned the liberal view of ethic individualism as well as formal equal treatment as a sufficient principle to redistribute power and achieving gender equality in practice (Hovden 2002). As in the larger society it was maintained that discrimination because of one's sex is often hidden and built into institutional power structures of sport. Because men and women have different starting points, equalization must be based on positive discrimination to obtain real equality (Hernes 1974). This ideological platform was inspired by the Norwegian Gender Equality Act passed in 1979, which opened for positive discrimination or preferential treatment to obtain gender equality in outcomes (Teigen 2001).

The new consciousness, linked to the limitation of an equalization of women according to male norms and values, brought new claims to the political agenda. The claims argued for the necessity of preferential treatment and women –centered perspectives to visualize and promote women's interests and experiences (NIF 1985). In 1984 with the change of leadership in Norwegian Sport, a new gender-political program targeting women's situation was initiated and passed. A Central Women's Committee with an overall responsibility for the implementation of this program was appointed. The objectives were to develop a common sport organization, rooted in the values and experiences found in both men's and women's sport culture (Fasting & Skou 1994). The program was based on a double strategy consisting of:

1. A special and segregated action program for women's sport built on preferential treatment.
2. A policy to integrate women into all organizational activities and particular into leadership and coaching positions (Fasting & Skou 1994).

The program emphasized the visualization of women's experiences, values and approaches as alternatives to the male dominated solutions. The long term goal was to develop a common sport organization, where:

...women and men in practice shall have equal opportunities to enjoy sport, to possess leadership positions and elected offices (posts) (NIF 1985:4).

The segregated program consisted of means like:

- The appointment of a consultant with responsibility for women's sport in the central administration.
- A course program to educate female leaders. The program was called: *Women can – will – and dare*”.
- Special courses for educating more female coaches.
- A proposal for the passing of a quota regulation to increase women's participation in the organizational decision-making (Skou 1990).

Segregated strategies and special actions to strengthen women's organizational status in sport organization have always been controversial (Lippe 1997). And the controversies were mostly directed to the separate and women-centered strategies underpinned by arguments that women as a group are facing discrimination and invisible barriers in male dominated organizations (Hovden 2000b). Part of this strategy was the proposal of a quota regulation to secure more women into the organizational decision-making. Use of gender quota regulations has always been controversial, but nevertheless experienced as the most efficient strategy to recruit and secure more women into central decision-making bodies (Skjeie 1992). The emphasis on regulations – as instruments for political change – expresses a belief that gender relations can be changed as a result of political-legal forms (Skeie & Teigen 2003, Teigen 2001).

The first proposal for a quota regulation in sport was discussed as early as in 1980, but was rejected (Fasting & Skou 1994). In 1987 a new proposal was brought on the agenda and this time it was passed. The main objective of the quota paragraph passed was to improve the gender balance in decision-making bodies by securing a minimum representation of each sex on all boards and committees (Skou 1990). Today the paragraph is included in NOCCS's Law.

Distinct increase of female representation at all organizational levels from the end of the eighties to the middle of the nineties indicated that the quota regulation worked according to its intentions (NIF 1995). In other words, women's position was in this period changed from tokenism to a status of a larger minority group with potentials to raise collective interests as women (Kanter 1977). The quota regulation in Norwegian sport was at the end of the eighties unique among sport organizations in Europe.

The quota regulation, however, did not change the patterns of men possessing the top positions in Norwegian sport (NIF/NOK 2002). There are several explanation for this limitation, and among them the fact that the quota regulation is formed as a gender- neutral minimum quota and do not address the gender-balance in the leadership positions (Hovden 2000 a).

The gender-political discourses at the end of the 1980's emphasized the importance of building organizational infrastructures to ensure a more gender-balanced sport system. It was essential to empower women to higher involvement in all parts and branches of the organization. Women were seen as a new resource-group (Skou 1990). The dominating women-centered perspective thus reflects a moral concern for more democratic and woman-

friendly sport organizations, as well as a concern for higher organizational efficiency. To bring women into leadership positions was often underpinned by arguments linked to both organizational utility and social justice. The utilitarian arguments were based on meanings of gender as a difference; to benefits of gendered differences. The social justice arguments were directed towards meanings of gender equity as a human right as well as an end in itself (Hovden 2002).

In the beginning of the 1990's the increasing market integration and commercialization of Norwegian sport led to a stronger conceptualization of gender as an instrumental value. We trace a stronger emphasis on difference- and utility-based gender-political discourses (Hovden 2000b, 2002), a change generated by a new normative climate underpinned by neo-liberal ideologies. These transformations combined with a new leadership of Norwegian Sport gradually led to an unrolling of political means based on women-centered perspectives and preferential actions. This shift brings us into a new phase and the third gender-political period.

1995–2003: Full gender integration directed by difference- and utility-oriented discourses

In 1994, in spite of protests and resistance from many of the leading women in Norwegian sport, a policy of so-called “full” gender integration was passed. The protests and resistance were grounded in arguments maintaining that it was too early to unroll the separate women's programs, because the male dominance in most organizational arenas was unchanged. Women's organizational position indicated a long way to go before the sporting realities mirrored women's situation and experiences to the same extent as men's (Hovden 2000b).

The only arguments behind this shift were that new methods and strategies were needed to achieve a more effective equalization between the genders. The stated objective for the new integration policy was to ensure that a gender perspective was integrated into all organizational activities. All organizational branches should be involved in promoting gender equality. The focus should be gender – not women – and take equally into account the needs and interest of both women and men (Hovden 2000 b, Hovden 2002). There was, however, little consensus about the definition of what the new policy based on “full gender integration” included. No overall political program or plans of how to implement the new gender-political approach were worked out.

The gender quota regulation was the only special means still in effect. Because the regulation was part of the organizational law, it was not considered as part of the special gender-political program. The only special effort planned to strengthen women's organizational position was: “The women project 1995-2000”. This project was directed towards a small sample of female elite athletes and leaders. The main purpose of this project was to support female athletes to win more medals in the Olympic games as well as raise the numbers of female leaders qualified to attend olympic teams (Fasting 2003). Liberal and neo-liberal discourses, where women's resources in certain ways were seen as an essential instrument to support the production of more olympic medals, were highly profiled in the project (NOK/Olympiatoppen 1995).

The intention of the new strategy was to generate discourses in which gendered meanings were widened and related to both men and women's situation in sport. Recent studies maintain, however, that it is difficult to see how this has happened (Fasting 1996, 2003, Hovden 2000 a). It seemed like the shift led to a situation, where most concerns for equal opportunities between men and women disappeared (Hovden 2003). In central policy documents discourses related to gender impact assessments of existing and proposed policies to anticipate their consequences on the two genders, were mostly absent (Hovden 2002). On the other hand during the same time period we trace a renewed emphasis on discourses where the utility of gender differences and particularly the utility of women as a difference are made relevant. These discourses have proved to be especially successful in the sense that they have met little resistance in a political climate, where market attraction has become a central policy issue as well as criteria of success (Hovden 2003).

A renewed acceptance of discourses focusing on gendered meanings related to bodily and heterosexual differences, has, however, led to an increasing sexualization and erotization of female athletes and women's sport. Recent studies indicate that women's potentials to make a difference in sports by exposing their femaleness and heterosexual attributes are seen as the most profitable way to sell female athletes and women's sports (Hovden 2003). In other words, we can see an extensive justification of gender-political discourses, which reproduce essential and stereotyped meanings of gender – meanings which often serve as a basis for social discrimination and unequal treatment of men and women in sport (Hovden 2000b). The political intention to stimulate and generate new, broader and less stereotyped meanings of gender has been realized only to a limited extent. In most cases we still find that conceptualizations of gender are linked to women's issues, to women's individual deficiencies and under-representation, and render silence in relation to men's power and the interrelations between masculinity, power and leadership. The present gender-political situation thus indicates a discursive reality in which culture-specific definitions and a valorization of an androcentric culture still – or once again – are perceived as normal and gender neutral. Discourses dealing with gender as a power relation or gender equality as a socio-ethical value and an end in itself, are downplayed (Hovden 2003).

In this situation it is tempting to ask if Norwegian sport organizations today are back to the sixties concerning gender policies. This is of course not the case. The gender-political landscape today appear a lot more multi-faceted, complex and ambiguous. Nevertheless, the present situation makes it important to question and reflect upon why gender equality concerns commands so limited political attention. Why discrimination and the existing hierarchical meanings of gender only exceptionally are addressed in proposed policies of sport?

Controversies, new landscapes and challenges

Norwegian sport today is as indicated shaped by a gender-political landscape where rights-, justice- and utility-based discourses are partly living side by side and partly woven into each other. In a market-oriented sport system, gender is in most cases made relevant from a difference- and utility-based approach, but the ongoing discussion this winter between the

female ski jumpers, the Norwegian Ski Federation and the International Ski Federation about women's right to participate in ski-flying on equal terms, reveals that also rights-based discourses are still relevant. The immense support to the women's demands from central actors and bodies in Norwegian sport, as well as from the larger society, proves, nevertheless, a high level of commitment to equal formal rights for all, independent of gender, both in Norwegian sport and in Norwegian society. And this commitment demonstrates that social and cultural meanings have changed substantially since the seventies.

On the other hand the female jumpers' situation also discloses certain patterns, which signalize continuity and persistency. E.g. the resistance of dealing with the underlying gendered power structures appears still to be strong and challenging. And when gender inequalities generate nothing but silence, the hegemonic culture can define and redefine when and how gender is relevant. The situation of the female jumpers illustrates that women's sporting realities are still defined by male elites, a male leadership with powers to conceal men's privileges as well as to define and redefine women's capacities and possibilities according to their discretion. But why do we still accept this reality in a country where gender equality policy has become an export product?

As indicated, the shift from a double strategy, including separated women-centered approaches towards a full integration model, occurred in a neo-liberal political climate. The policy making was thus exposed to stronger pressure from outside market actors, and this created a new normative landscape in sport politics. Feminist studies suggest that meanings of gender and how gender is made relevant are dependent on the normative construction of institutional contexts (e.g. Ferguson 1984, Johannessen 1994). In the market logic, gender equality is essentially seen as an instrumental value rather than an end in itself. These political changes combined by controversies linked to a gender policy based on preferential actions, led to a gender-political shift. And this shift was passed, despite the conclusions in the evaluation report, addressing the effects of the separated women's program, which maintained that an integration strategy will require a continuation of the specific gender equality policy to ensure that concerns of gender imbalances do not disappear in the overall organizational policy (Skou 1990). This policy-making indicates that market integration dominated by utility-oriented gender-political discourses seems to consolidate the institutional male hegemony as well as to stimulate a rebuilding of gendered biases in Norwegian sport.

Lack of gender-political initiatives and intentions to follow up stated organizational goals to benefit men and women equally, show that the dominating discourse of so called 'mainstreaming' gender equality policy has functioned more as a political "sleeping pillow" than an impetus to change existing gender hierarchies. In this perspective the strategic shift to full integration policy represented a rhetorical turn rather than a move directed by a strong organizational vision and political will to bring gender equality concerns from the periphery to the center. It is easy to take a decision saying that equality is to be integrated in all policies and then do little or nothing more about it. According to experts on gender mainstreaming strategies, the most important criteria for success is *the will and firm commitment of policy-makers to redress not only the existing imbalances between woman and men, but also to tackle the reasons for those imbalances* (e.g. Council of Europe 1998, Rees 1998). This commitment also includes the necessary financial and human resources for political implementation. The

gender-political discourses of Norwegian sport today reveal that the policy makers seem to lack both the commitment and the will to target gendered imbalances (Fasting 1996, 2003, Hovden 2000b, 2002, 2003).

The present situation can in this perspective be seen as a back-lash. A transformation from voluntary ideals towards more businesslike structures has obviously facilitated new political frameworks, challenges and dilemmas for policies promoting gender equalization based on socio-ethical values. The political justification of gender differences as instrumental values, mostly connected to biological differences and in particular women as sexual objects, makes it difficult to be critical and speak loudly about gendered substructures, inequalities, subordination and male dominance. When gender is seen as a potential for making a profitable difference, it is not pleasurable to argue that concerns for gender equality costs both in economic and political ways. Thus the dominance of utility based discourses generates a crumbling of right and justice-oriented discourses. These are downplayed and loose political relevance.

The current state of the gendering of sport indicates a political landscape where the fight for gender equality seems to be more necessary and challenging than ever before. This fight will among other factors include strong and strategic efforts to once again break the silence related to asymmetric gender/power relations, to hidden discrimination and marginalization of women. In this process it will be necessary to identify and discuss neo-liberal modes of gendering and confront these modes with socio-ethical discourses anchored both in social justice and men and women's right to be equally valued.

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