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# Talk of equality is risky business for career in the oil industry

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White men dominate leadership positions in the Norwegian petroleum industry. If you're a woman and want to climb the career ladder, you need to keep your mouth shut when there's talk of gender and equality, according to researchers.



*This article was originally published on Kilden - Information and news about gender research in Norway. [Read the original article](#)[5].*

Why isn't gender an issue when leaders in the petroleum industry, both male and female, account for their career paths to their top job?

This is one of the questions addressed in two new scientific articles published in the anthology *Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practises: the Gendered Dynamics of Power*. The book focuses on unconscious and gendered power structures in the Norwegian business sector.

The oil and gas industry ranges as number two on the list of industries in the Norwegian labour market with the least gender equality on leadership level. Whereas we find sixteen per cent women in executive positions, there are only nine per cent women in mid-level manager positions, according to CORE Norwegian Gender Balance Scorecard.

Nevertheless, the leaders use a gender-neutral language when they describe their way to the top.

“The women that I've interviewed don't talk about men and women, they talk about employees. This kind of language is very consistent. Since there are few women in the industry, they seek to downplay their role as women,” says Marit Aure, associate professor at Department of Social Sciences at UiT the Arctic University of Norway.

## Have to 'de-gender' themselves

Aure has interviewed a number of female executive leaders in three multinational corporations within the Norwegian petroleum industry. When Aure asks the women why they were the ones to become leaders, they describe recruitment processes based on transparency, gender neutrality and individual competence.

“Many of the women say that they didn't plan to become leaders, that it 'just happened'. They describe how they were recognised as talents early in their career. Because of this, they kept getting new opportunities and challenges within the organisation.”

“How do these women explain the uneven gender balance within the petroleum industry?”

“Since they are so conscious of speaking in gender-neutral terms, they quickly turn to the traditional explanations,” says Aure.

“That it has been like this from the beginning, but that it is about to change, partly because there are more women now with higher education.”

She emphasises that the female leaders in no way believe that the uneven gender balance will regulate itself. They are very conscious of gender and are well aware that there are gendered structures within the company.

Previous research has shown how homosocial structures, or informal relations between men in male dominated businesses, create networks and information sharing among men.

“The gendered power structures are not necessarily about direct discrimination. However, leaders tend to help people who are like themselves to advance within the organisation. And because men have traditionally occupied the leader positions, this may prevent women from climbing the career ladder.”

In male dominated businesses, you become very visible as a woman, according to Aure. A veil of suspicion may lie upon a woman who is promoted to a leader position: perhaps she got the position just because she is a woman and not because she has done a good job?

“Therefore, the women are highly preoccupied with talking about competence, education and experience. They want to create the impression that they have advanced at work due to other things than their gender.”

Aure interprets the gender-neutral language in the sense that the female leaders in the petroleum industry have to ‘degender’ themselves in order to avoid the risk of being first and foremost a woman within the company.

An engineer is often implicitly understood to be a man, whereas a female engineer first and foremost remains a woman. The female leaders use gender-neutral language in order to counter such stereotypes.

“This is not something they do to get ahead, which is often the impression you get from research literature. Rather, it is a strategy that aims to make gender seem less significant,” says Aure.

### **Gender-neutral recruitment?**

Many of the leaders that Aure has interviewed have been involved in numerous recruitment processes throughout their career. Aure wanted to find out how the women experienced the recruitment process from the other side of the table, when they were themselves responsible for recruiting new talents into the business.

“Here they face a dilemma. They describe the recruitment process as gender neutral – that is really important. If they say anything else it may sound like women or minorities have assumed positions in a non-legitimate manner,” she says.

“At the same time, they know that there won’t be more women or more diversity in the company unless they do something with the situation.”

Leaders and those responsible for recruitment solve the dilemma by using a type of semi-neutral, but gender sensitive, recruitment strategy: They find ways to recruit that secure equal opportunities for women and men, without proclaiming gender equality as a criterion in the recruitment process.

“For instance, some of the women I interviewed said that everybody has a tendency to practice homosocial recruitment. This means that you tend to seek out people with whom you can identify. Women who are

responsible for recruitment may thus reduce homosocial recruitment among men.”

Aure explains that the leaders understand equality as equal opportunities rather than equal results: It is important that nothing prevents candidates from having equal opportunities, for instance that men who hire other men direct and develop the industry, or that men’s specific experiences are valued higher than women’s.

Despite the gender-neutral language, there are elements in the semi-neutral recruitment practice that are similar to feminist policies, according to Aure. She says that the practice allows women to assert themselves.

“Moreover, the leaders speak openly about increased diversity as a goal, and here gender is included as one of the components.”

### **Self-conserving power structures**

Aure did not realise what kind of theoretical approach that could best explain how they understand their own career until after she had spoken to the female leaders: the Bible.

“The idea to use the Bible as a mode of interpretation came when the women described their own career path towards the top as a creation myth. As if God’s – or the company’s’ – providence had led them into their leader position.”

In order to justify their own role and the structures within the organisation, it is almost as if the employees exalt the organisation and its leaders to something divine, according to Aure. They understand the hierarchy within the business as a product of a meritocracy in which people are employed or promoted based on competence and talent.

“If you start asking questions regarding decisions and begin to talk about structures and power, this understanding of the organisation as fair will fall apart. It is therefore important to hold on to the explanation that emphasises meritocratic values,” says Aure.

According to Aure, the theological perspective may thus help us understand why the power structures in the organisation are often self-conserving.

“A theological reading of the organisation brings to light that the leaders conceal hierarchies and structures when they talk about the organisations.”

Furthermore, the companies have provided the leaders with many opportunities, and many have feelings of gratitude and loyalty towards the organisation. They are therefore interested in defending it against criticism,” she adds.

### **Engineer + leader = masculine**

But is it only the women in the petroleum industry that are focused on using a gender-neutral language when talking about their own career?

No, says Maria Dockweiler, gender equality consultant at University of Southern Denmark. Together with researchers Øystein Gullvåg Holter and Lotta Snickare, she has interviewed male leaders in the petroleum industry and asked why and how they became leaders. Their explanation is very similar to the women’s.

“The men build their identity on being ‘competent men’,” says Dockweiler.

Like Aure’s informants, the male leaders’ descriptions of their own career paths are also gender-neutral. Discussing the lack of women as a discrimination issue would imply that the male leaders have an advantage

by virtue of their gender. This might mean that they did not get their job exclusively as a result of their competence, Dockweiler explains.

This would not only challenge the men's view of the companies as objective and transparent. It would also undermine their own identity as competent and masculine men.

“While the men speak gender-neutral, they explain the gender imbalance within the industry by referring to the engineer profession and leadership as natural parts of men's identity. They perceive their occupation as masculine,” says Dockweiler.

### **Downsizing challenges attitudes**

Aure's study was conducted before the drop in the oil prices. Dockweiler, Holter and Snickare, on the other hand, did their interviews while the companies were in the middle of a downsizing process as a result of the dropping prices.

The researchers wanted to find out what happens with the leaders' idea of their own career and organisation in an unusual and difficult situation.

“The cuts in the workforce created room for perceiving themselves, power and the petroleum industry in a new way,” says Dockweiler.

She and her colleagues use interviews with two male leaders, James and Thomas, to illustrate their point. While James lost his executive position, Thomas remained in his position and became responsible for dismissing people from their jobs.

Despite their different roles in the downsizing process, they both began to doubt the integrity and transparency of the organisation – which they had previously taken for granted. Both Thomas and James describe a sense of powerlessness, knowing that certain decisions are made behind closed doors within a small executive group.

“James experienced the situation as fundamentally degrading and unfair. Thomas, on the other hand, felt that he had not received sufficient information from the leadership concerning the goal of the downsizing and the ideal minimum amount of staff,” says Dockweiler.

The researchers nevertheless concluded that the cuts in the workforce did not change the men's actual behavioural patterns to any great extent.

“Despite the extreme loss of power and position for James, he clings to the idea of himself as a leader and a competent man precisely in this industry. He therefore remains in his job, hoping to be promoted again someday,” says Dockweiler.

“If a person is stuck within one framework of understanding, it is incredible what they can endure. They have a strong faith in the organisation and the profession, which is interwoven with their own identity.”

### **Gender needs a language**

According to Marit Aure, it is necessary to speak more openly about gender dynamics and power structures internally within the petroleum industry. She has observed how it has become common to presume, particularly among young people, that the increased number of women with higher education will automatically result in gender equality within the male bastions of the labour market.

“Many also think that if it doesn’t happen it is because of women’s own choices.”

The reality is very different, according to Aure, who emphasises that factors such as gender, functional level, ethnicity and family background all play their part.

“Not everybody gets the same opportunities in work life. That is what I have tried to demonstrate: there are mechanisms that ensure some people’s paths towards the top within the organisation whereas others are held back. Gender is a part of these mechanisms.”

Dockweiler agrees.

“From an equality perspective, it is very interesting that we have spoken to white, well-educated men who say they have ended up in an executive position in the petroleum industry more or less by chance. To them the door is open, they can enter directly if they so wish.”

According to her, the petroleum industry still has a long way to go when it comes to working actively with gender and equality matters.

“It has been very difficult to get access and conduct fieldwork on the inside of this industry. It is also challenging to get the informants to speak about gender. Moreover, gender and equality matters are given less priority during hard times.”

 [The oil and gas industry ranges as number two on the list of industries with the highest gender imbalance on leadership level in the Norwegian labour market. Nevertheless, gender is not an issue among the leaders within the industry, according to researchers. \(Illustrative photo: think4photop, Shutterstock, NTB scanpix\)](#) [6]

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