

Female leaders are catching up with their male colleagues

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In Norway, two in three managers are still men. But researchers think this gender gap will close in one generation.

In Norway, a country on top of the global ranking list on gender equality, women's share of leading positions is growing gradually, but slowly. The gender gap in top management is closing even more sluggishly. However, recent research gives ground for a more optimistic view of the future.

"One generation away, about 30 years from now, the distribution of female and male leaders may be 50-50. It probably will be just as natural for a woman to be a leader as for a man," says Knud Knudsen, professor emeritus in sociology at The University of Stavanger's Department of Media and Social Sciences.

Together with professor Tom Colbjørnsen at BI Norwegian Business School, he has studied men's and women's career trajectories, and pointed to factors which may explain their climb in workplace hierarchies. Over a period of twelve years, they have observed progress which gives reason for optimism.

"Progress will be faster"

According to Statistics Norway, women's share of management positions grew from 30 to 35 per cent between 2008 and 2016. In top management, the figure went up from 20 to 22 per cent in the same period.

The researchers base their optimism on the fact that women now start their careers at higher management levels than before. Furthermore, they are catching up with men, and they are – to a great extent – in control of some crucial determinants.

"Our findings provide a more optimistic view of the progress of women's share than other Norwegian studies. The number of women in leading positions is approaching critical mass, which in all likelihood will speed up the development further," the researcher point out.

Gender gap narrowed

The researchers have analysed the starting point of women's and men's management careers. Do they, for instance, start out as first-line managers or middle- or top managers? They found that in 1999, men started their careers at a higher level than women, and that the gender gap has since narrowed.

"Young female managers at the outset of their careers in 2011, started in higher positions than those in a similar phase in 1999. In 2011, the job levels for women managers in a beginner's phase were about the same as men's," the researcher says.

In addition to a more equal entry into their management careers, women catch up on men over time.

"Women who stay on in management positions, climb the career ladder faster, and may succeed in cutting into men's lead," Knudsen says.

Higher education and the private sector forward women's careers

The researchers have also studied which factors determine men and women leaders' way to the top. While education level does not seem to matter to men's job positions, a long, formal education clearly benefits women leaders.

"Education is something women are in control of themselves. We see women's share in higher education rising, management training included. There are now large classes of able women ready to take over," says Knudsen.

For men, on the other hand, it appears to be all about getting a head start, and be willing to go 'all in' by working long hours.

Economic sector is another factor determining women's way to the top. The researchers found that women in the public sector were employed at lower levels than women in the private sector. Female managers in the public sector suffer a significant career loss, compared with male managers who don't experience a similar loss.

The reason for this may be that female managers often choose the public sector for its 'family friendly' arrangements, such as flexible working hours and generous leave of absence policies. Previous research has pointed out that social welfare schemes may contribute to the stagnation of women's careers, as they 'tempt' women to continue taking the main responsibility for their home life and children. In practice, this is a responsibility which is difficult to combine with the efforts required for a management career.

"It is a paradox that social benefits may contribute to this," Knudsen says.

Unique data on Norwegian managers

The article makes use of data from the Administrative Research Institute (AFF) surveys.

In the survey, 586 managers are interviewed on three occasions – in 1999, 2002 and 2011. The data are unique in providing the opportunity to study Norwegian managers over a period of twelve years. Among other features, they document the ways in which gender influences managers' careers. This is probably the first time such a large number of managers have been followed so closely over time, at least in the Scandinavian setting.

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[Colbjørnsen, T. & Knudsen, K. «Underveis. Menns og kvinners lederkarrierer» \(2018\), Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning. Universitetsforlaget. \(Abstract in English.\)](#) [10]

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