This highly original book takes its readers on a journey well beyond the narrow confines of the social scientific domination of work and organization studies, providing a dazzling series of insights into what the world of the humanities has to offer. With its heady mix of empirical richness and theoretical exploration, it is an inspiring read for anyone with an interest in the gendered politics of organizational images, narratives, symbols, and embodied ways of being. One of the book's many strengths is its appeal for radical, theoretically-informed intervention into the gendered dynamics of organisational power relations. Written by challenging and original thinkers, the whole collection opens up the ways in which we write and think about organizational aesthetics, cultures and power that is both theoretically sophisticated and conceptually ground-breaking. The book deals head-on with the question of how we are to understand, and address, persistent forms of aesthetic and embodied inequalities as these are lived and experienced in a wide range of organizational contexts, and through a whole host of practices, including those that perpetuate aesthetic discrimination and embodied oppression, often whilst purporting to do precisely the opposite.

Melissa Tyler, *Essex Business School, University of Essex, UK*

This very timely book covers a diverse range of topics, industries and approaches to develop understanding gendered/gendering bodies as symbols of organizational practices. Like all good feminist work the book is avowedly political: one of its aims is to 'forestall women's complicity with a neoliberal climate that is so harmful for the majority of women'. But it does far more than this. Each chapter contains a particularly valuable, thought-provoking or mind-expanding nugget that insists on worming its way into one's thought-processes and writing. The chapters exemplify the advantages of social scientists and colleagues from the Arts and Humanities working together: something truly new and insightful emerges from such collaborations. The book is a delight to read, from start to finish.

Nancy Harding, *Bradford University School of Management, UK*

Here is an edited book about gender and organization that is distinctive in demonstrating the importance of the body and its symbolic implications in interrogating the power that revolves around the hegemonic masculinities of our contemporary neo-liberal social order. The editors draw together a broad range of chapters that make a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics of the visual as well as the discursive aspects of gendered power.

David Knights, *Department of Organization, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School, UK*

The authors in this anthology turn a collective eye on a present beckoning urgently for feminist scrutiny. Their various theoretical engagements offer insightful accounts of the production and reproduction of organization under neoliberal limits while advancing possibilities for imagining different worlds to subvert such limits. Creatively conceived, this collection delivers a highly readable feminist encounter with the contemporary conditions of organization.

Marta B. Calás and Linda Smircich, *University of Massachusetts – Amherst, US*

The book speaks about gender as a social practice, the coexistence of space and things, of bodies and discourses, and also the fortunate optimism of science that launches a transdisciplinary feminist turn in opposition to dominant cultural hegemony. What this book does is to show how organizational practices are wrapped up in a profoundly aesthetic yet politicized sphere of images, narratives, symbols, and bodies.

Silvia Gherardi, *Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning, and Aesthetics, University of Trento, Italy*

Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practice

Despite all the efforts to promote change, power and authority still seem to be permanently associated with the white, the straight and the masculine, both symbolically and in the everyday world of organizations.

As the intricate relationship between the symbolic and the everyday remains under-researched, this anthology launches a transdisciplinary feminist turn from the social sciences to the humanities, in order to explore the complex nature of the gendered politics of organizations. Indeed, analysing how images, narratives, symbols and bodies are all part of how power and gender are constructed in organizations through a broad and international range of empirical studies, *Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practice* explores issues at the interstices of the humanities and social sciences, combining theoretical and analytical perspectives from both areas.

Providing a radical analysis of the gendered dynamics of power as well as petitioning for radical intervention into those dynamics, this timely volume will appeal to postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers interested in fields such as: organization and management studies, gender studies, feminist theory and sociology of work and industry.

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Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practice

The Gendered Dynamics of Power

**Edited by
Agnes Bolsø, Stine H. Bang Svendsen and
Siri Øyslebø Sørensen**

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Preface

There is obviously no quick fix that can mend organizations and make them just in terms of the distribution of power. At times, power and authority seem forever glued to the white, the straight and the masculine, symbolically as well as in organizational practices. But we all know that this is not the full picture. More is going on. This book, *Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practice: The Gendered Dynamics of Power*, demonstrates stability, in particular with respect to symbols and images of power, but also potential for change. Today, powerful positions are embodied by women all over the world, and organizations *do* change. In this book, we ask what the presence of women in leadership might mean for organizational practices, for images of organizations and for the future development of both organizations and societies.

All the authors in this book are connected with a project on gender and power in powerful organizations, funded by the Research Council of Norway 2013–17: 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's most powerful of them all? Gender as a symbolic and social structure in organizations'. Both the wider project and this book have offered us arenas for transdisciplinary collaboration in practice, especially between the social sciences and the humanities. Perspectives from the humanities have been scantily articulated in organizational studies, a field dominated by social science. It is our hope that this book will inspire further thought and reflection on gender, power and organization within that part of academia.

With three exceptions, all of the organizations and realities we explore in the book are Nordic. Nevertheless, our ambition is of a more general kind. We relate actively to the theoretical shifts in international feminist studies, which is also clear from the ways in which we illustrate the significance of the humanities for feminist organization studies. Even though the Nordic countries are often among the top five in international rankings for welfare and equality, when it comes to power dynamics at the top level of big organizations the challenges are disappointingly similar in all developed economies. In addition, the organizations we have studied in a Nordic context have a global relevance. Oil, finance, the military, the maritime sector, international non-governmental organizations – all of these organizations relate actively to an international audience and global customers. We strongly believe that

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there will be an empirical resonance with research from other parts of the world.

It has been a pleasure to work with the collective of authors, not least during the intensely productive few weeks we spent together during the spring of 2016. We are very grateful for language assistance from Liz Sourbut. Thanks to Emily Briggs, Elena Chiu, Dawn Preston, Ruth Bradley, and Routledge for this opportunity!

7   The Genesis of leaders

Women in the petroleum industry

Marit Aure

Introduction

> Career was never important to me. The important thing was to have interesting
> tasks.

Prompted to reflect on their own career paths, female and male managers alike often suggest that they had no specific aspirations to be promoted into leading positions, but that it somehow happened to them, as though by an external and divine plan. This chapter explores such career narratives among female leaders and asks how the externalization of agency can shed light on gendered aspects of organizations and leadership recruitment.

How do female leaders account for the fact that the company has identified them and some of their male colleagues as talents, and steered their development towards top management positions? In order to explore this question and the cultural meanings of the narratives, I use the lens of the Judeo-Christian myth of Genesis, which describes how the Sovereign created the world from above. The chapter analyses the narratives of female leaders who depict their career path as strictly gender-neutral, and solely based on meritocracy. As top leaders, these women are eventually in a position to manage their companies' recruitment policies and practices. When explaining the company and their own recruitment practices, they speak in rather gender-neutral terms, using concepts like 'equal opportunities' and 'diversity', and hence avoid addressing women and gender explicitly. However, it becomes clear that gender, ethnicity, educational background and other forms of concrete social difference matter in the process. The discrepancy between gender-neutral rhetoric on the one hand, and gender specific measures in recruitment on the other, is central to my final discussion about organizational policy.

Empirical studies since Kanter (1977), Mills (1988) and Acker (1990) have documented how most organizations, including those in the extractive industries, tend to be gendered and masculine, although this is often masked in gender-neutral language (Miller 2004; Bastalich et al. 2007; Franzway et al. 2009; Faulkner 2009; Mayes and Pini 2010, 2014). The idea of a gender-neutral organization also appears in the narratives of the female managers in this

study. To understand this gender 'denial' discourse of meritocracy and
individualism is one of the main challenges in gender and management
research today, according to Broadbridge and Simpson (2011). The chapter
approaches this challenge by using Genesis as an analytical perspective,
inspired by the theology of organization (Sørensen et al. 2012), which is
rarely applied in gender and management studies. In the first part of this
analysis, I consider how the myth of Genesis can provide a cultural con-
textualization and a symbolic structure that can inform the analysis of the
women's narratives of becoming leaders themselves. What does it signify if the
narratives of female managers play into the structure, logic and figures of
Genesis, the strongest myth in Judeo-Christian culture? What does this cul-
tural script help us to highlight about our understandings of gender and
management in male-dominated organizations? In the second part, I ask how
top managers talk about actual recruitment practices when they are co-
responsible themselves. Does this change of viewpoint and position in the
organization change the way in which they speak about recruitment and, if
so, how?

The next section presents my approach to myths and the theology of
management, and reviews the main characteristics of Genesis.

Myths, narratives and the theology of organizations

Genesis is a religious myth. According to Patton and Doniger (1996: 11),
myths involve a narrative of how the world and humankind came into being,
and do more than simply narrate. Pettigrew uses myths in organizational
analyses to reveal man (here taken to denote people) as a creator and manager
of meaning in organizations (Pettigrew 1979: 572), while in a study of the
bestselling handbook 'The Minute Maid', Monin and Monin (2005) highlight
how genres, in their case the fairy tale, further the content of a story. Myths
legitimate and justify, they reinforce the solidarity and stability of a system
and thereby reconcile the contradictions between professed values and actual
behaviour (Pettigrew 1979: 576). The relationship between narratives and
practices is thus interesting. Myths have the 'capacity to express ideology as a
narrative rather than as a logical argumentative structure' (Prasad 1997: 131).
Analysing narrative effects makes ideology visible, although employing the
concept of myths also invites assertions about their level of validity, from
'primordial truth' or 'sacred story', through to 'lie' or 'obsolete worldview'
(Lincoln 1999). Sørensen (2008: 88) connects management studies, theology
and myths, and highlights the significance of the 'mythical knowledge' that is
deeply embedded within the culture for understanding organizations, while
Ogbor (2000: 629) sees theological myths as systematically reinforcing the
prevailing social order and as a method of deception.

Gherardi and Poggio (2007: 8) argue that: 'It is in narrating that signs,
traces of events, are assembled to acquire complete sense … thought becomes
reflexive, turning back upon itself to compose a narrative and give shape to

what was indistinct.' Narratives give access to material practices, the way in which organizational actors interpret them, and the production of meaning and identity. Examining stories, and the narrative practices with which they are constructed, is thus a fruitful way to study gender as discourses, practices and institutions (Gherardi and Poggio 2007).

The theology of organizations assumes that our thinking about them is profoundly structured and informed by theological concepts (Sørensen et al. 2012: 268). Organizations and organization studies often conceptualize figures such as the leader through culturally naturalized, yet theological, motifs. Exploring the symbolic context of such concepts may enable us to challenge established ways of thinking, by de-naturalizing or de-familiarizing the imagery. Reading the 'genesis of a top leader' through a theological lens highlights performative effects in the narrative, and acknowledges the role of myths in organizations. I explore the implications of a particular understanding's indebtedness to theology and ask what the perspective of Genesis helps to articulate in the recruitment narrative. This makes Genesis an analytical perspective, which can magnify the production of gender, gender denial and managers in organizations and their relations to the Judeo-Christian Genesis myth.

The industry, this study and methods

This chapter is based on data drawn from a set of open-ended qualitative interviews with senior female managers in three big multinational companies in the Norwegian petroleum industry.[1]

Men and engineers dominate the petroleum industry, and there are in general few female managers in these organizations. The industry had 21 per cent female managers and 24 per cent women in senior management positions in 2015, rising from 16 and 11 per cent, respectively, in 2006, and only 10 per cent of the companies' top CEOs are women (Bye et al. 2016). Despite a rather slow pace, the number of women and female managers in the petroleum industry is increasing. The three companies analysed here have more than the average proportion of female leaders.

This study is based on six face-to-face interviews, five Skype interviews, one telephone interview and some ethnographic work that took place at meetings, while sharing meals, etc. The interviews followed the women's 'career stories' through a life-course approach, and encouraged descriptions of practices and interactions with colleagues and employees. These stories gave access to how the women made sense of their development as top managers and their practices in top managerial positions. The women all have higher education, and are white Norwegians aged between 40 and 60 years old. On average, they have about 19 years of experience with their current companies and approximately ten years in higher management positions.

Genesis

Let us recall Genesis chapter 1. The opening words in the Bible – as most people brought up within a Judeo-Christian[2] culture recognize them – read:[3] 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep.' Creation started when: 'God said, "Let there be light."' He then separated light from darkness before making several separations during the first three days; the water above from beneath, the water from the land. He brought order out of chaos (Hyers 1984).

During the next three days, God populated his creation: He created the grass, the sun and the moon, the creatures of the seas, the birds, animals, and finally the humans. In Genesis chapter 1, God created humans in this way: 'God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likenes" [sic] … He created him; male and female He created them.' He referred to the humans as him, encompassing both man and woman, in the image of God. These formulations are the basis for holding that women and men are equal in life as in God (Brenner 1993). They establish that both men and women are made in God's image, they are equal, yet different in form.

This narrative from Genesis relates how God created this world. Other forms of genesis narrate the creation in other ways (Kvanvig 2011). They follow the genre of a creation myth and present a worldview, a cosmology (Hyers 1984), often underlined by the familiarity of the style, the feelings it invokes, its rhythm and rhyme. Genesis is a unique blend of prose and poetry, figurative language, repetition and anthropomorphism, representing God as though he were a human being (Hummel 1986: 177). Genesis includes the acts and orders of divisions and populations, and how God named his creation: 'God called the light Day' says the Bible, in an act of appropriation that signalled ownership. God also repeatedly stated that his work was good – a speech act that highlights the moral landscape of the narrative. The frequent use of repetition also works to hold the story together, and establishes the goodness of God and his cosmology (Schottroff 1993). In my analysis, I use the structure and content of Genesis chapter 1 to bring out the mythical aspects of top female leaders' narratives about becoming a leader. How can the analytical perspective of Genesis help us address gender in the recruitment of top managers?

The Genesis of a top leader

The opening words of Genesis not only tell about a beginning, they make the beginning: God installs himself as the divine sovereign over the chaos of the void. In my interviews with female managers, I noticed that the narratives of becoming a leader position junior women in a purposeless emptiness before the beginning. 'I did not plan any career,' says an engineer, a 51-year-old vice president. She was echoed by others; for example: 'becoming a leader never occurred to me'. Their narratives create a beginning, before which they can be

pictured in a professional sense as 'without form' – 'darkness was on the face
of the deep' (Genesis 1:2). This structure gives the company the role of the
almighty creator. The company and its actions become naturalized as a legit-
imate orchestration of the events that followed. This paves the way for a nar-
rative of predestination, which renders the talents and the company mentors
innocent of any bias.

Dividing the ordinary from the talents: creating the divine hierarchy

The first act of creation and the first division the company makes is to separate
the leaders-to-be from the ordinary employees. They were selected and named
talents: 'I was on the list of identified talents. Someone had a plan for me to
enter this level,' says a CEO and economist. 'The operations manager recog-
nized me – and there were others who had also seen me. I didn't know anything,'
an offshore operation manager and engineer relates. Dividing the best from the
rest grants symbolic divinity to the senior managers and mentors by putting
them in charge of the creation on behalf of the organization. They select the
talents, naming and appropriating them, alluding to the goodness of the act.

Sørensen et al. (2012: 271) argue that organizations position themselves as
sacred by setting the entrepreneurs and leaders apart from ordinary employees:
sacred literally means that which is set apart. According to Thomas Aquinas,
hierarchical organizations represent the 'sacred rule' and divide between 'the sacred
high above in the sky or in the executive lounge, [and] the profane deep below on
earth and among the most ordinary of men' (Sørensen et al. 2012: 271).

According to Schottroff (1993), the chaos of the beginning was disorderly
because everyone was of equal power but, through Genesis, God assigned
'everything its proper place and function' (Hyers 1984: 210). Using narrative
elements from Genesis hence legitimizes and naturalizes hierarchies, leadership –
and the leaders. Dividing the leaders from the empirical world abstracts and
disembodies managers and the organizational culture (see Acker 1990). This
obscures the power; yet, paradoxically, the disembodiment also reduces their
interventions. The distant leaders become impotent, according to Sørensen et
al. (2012: 272) which, at the same time, protects them from critique: they get
the power to lead, while their wrongdoings cling to the organization. The
myth of origin makes space for divine organizations but also leads to contra-
dictions that protect the managers. The separation of the talents from the rest,
drawing on the symbolic order of Genesis, serves to grant divinity to the
hierarchical organization, the managers' acts, and the named talents, and
hence legitimizes them. Nevertheless, the following division suggests that it is
not sufficient for the talents to be the best.

Dividing the devoted from the careerists

The women whom I interviewed insisted that they had not pursued a plan for
becoming leaders. Rather the contrary, as one project leader (aged 42) said:

'I'm a person who's open to new challenges; the most important is to have fun at work.' Fun, in this context, being to master the challenges in her field of expertise. After dividing the talents from the ordinary staff, the narrative structure suggests a second act of division. This separates the devoted employee, who is hard working and clever, from the careerist seeking prestige. Several women expressed views such as this: 'career was never important to me. The important thing was to have interesting tasks. To have the energy – it has to be challenging and rewarding, that has been my guideline' (vice president, engineer, 51 years old). As juniors, their goal was to learn and the ideal was to 'be hard working'; 'get things done'; 'take on difficult tasks'; 'be devoted'; 'gain useful experience'; 'meet expectations'; and 'finish the job'. However, they did not do this in order to 'climb the career ladder', a goal that was clearly despised. They did it because they were devoted. This selection distinguishes between the devoted and the overly ambitious: the company recruitment plan, which is not revealed to the 'talents', prevents an ascension to leadership by relying on strategic manoeuvring. But, there is a requirement: 'You need to have a sponsor, and even several if possible, to get the opportunities, and even more so, to really see the possibilities' (engineer, 44 years old, director offshore).

The recruitment system is not transparent but follows a certain logic. Your superiors build your career, make sure you have the right experience and demand that you prove yourself. They design the meritocracy. An engineer and CEO says 'I deliver on time, with the right quality at the agreed cost and get things done.' Her skills, work ethic and ability to finish the job were observed and valued, and hence she deserves her position. The process of selection assured the legitimacy of her superior's choice.

The creation in Genesis is the realm of God, and this renders humans passive (Kvanvig 2011). In the female managers' narrative, the talents are represented as the passive objects of the organization. This is evident in the division between careerists and true professionals. It was not their ambitions that spurred their identification as talents. On the contrary, the narrative produces the 'becoming of a leader' as something that was meant to be: they were chosen, and the choice was right because they did their job well and possessed the right motivation.

The notion of being passive carries different connotations for women and men. Eve, as we know from the narrative in Genesis chapter 3, refused to be passive. She ate the forbidden fruit, and persuaded Adam to eat it too, thus opposing God. God then appointed man to rule over her, and made her the object of his ruling. This objectification is embedded in cultural interpretations of the physical body. Irigaray (1977/85) has shown how the feminine vagina has almost invariably been seen as passive, valued only for the 'lodging' it offers to a man's organ. Women are defined by their lack compared to men, and women's own experience of their bodies is missing. Irigaray exposes how this denies women existence and accountability, and 'makes' them passive. This has steered depictions of women as modest, silent, not standing out and not being ambitious.

In light of this cultural backdrop, the passive position ascribed to the 'talents' in the career narratives of female managers should be expected to apply differently to male and female junior staff. In short, the cultural script of passivity is so dominant in understandings of female subjectivity that it should be expected to make female talent invisible. The female managers, however, explained how they stand out and refuse this position by noting that they were 'the strongest in my class', 'always competitive', a 'medal-winning athlete' and so on. They emphasize that you 'don't arrive in these positions without setting strict priorities', 'don't care what others might think' or 'I don't see the point of being modest'. More than one scorned her male colleagues, distancing themselves from men who show ambition while lacking skills and competence.

However, when God created humans, he also 'let them have dominion … over all the earth' and connected the divine and the earth, which had been set apart (Kvanvig 2011: 2). This repositions humans as agents in the world. Drawing on these elements of Genesis, we can see that the cultural script allows contradictions between agency and passivity in the female managers' narratives. The gender-neutral, individualistic 'Genesis narrative' produces this contradictory, yet meaningful, narrative element: leaders-to-be are represented as modest, carefully selected, clever and deserving of their position as leaders. But they are also devoted and responsible for their own destiny. The internal logic of this cosmology makes room for the pure leader as a person who has earned his/her position through the efforts of professionalism and modesty, and by being among the chosen ones. The distinction between the devoted and the careerist justifies the idea that these talents have entered management positions in the organization in legitimate ways, de-genders the organization and removes the mark of Eve from the female talents.

Dividing gender from profession: purification and meritocracy

In the narratives, it is possible to identify a third separation relating to the issues discussed above: professionalism is separated from gender through the use of strictly gender-neutral language. One engineer, director of a technology department (aged 46), put it this way: 'This company is more concerned with engineering, and thus the candidate, than about women.' This separates women from engineering, and de-genders the field of expertise.[4] By taking 'woman' out of the narrative, it is possible for these leaders to be visible as engineers and professionals, rather than as women. The point that women as well as men can make excellent engineers is clearly conveyed, in a move that underplays gender. One manager states: 'The thinking that skills do not have gender is in our bones.' This grants women the position of professional, not female professional, and rhetorically generates the possibility of female managers and engineers, without pointing to gender.

This separation between professionalism and gender is significant, because it negotiates the risk that is symbolically attached to the figure of women in

Judeo-Christian culture. Women's precarious position in relation to power is connected to the two emblematic but very different texts and understandings of gender in Genesis (Brenner 1993: 14): Genesis 1 focuses on the 'likenes [sic] of God … in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.' The woman's situation is arrestingly different in Genesis 2:7:

> And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground … God said, '*It is* not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him' … He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.

This latter narrative positions the woman, although comparable, as a helper made for man, from man. This origin story combines together with God's curse punishing Eve for eating the forbidden fruit, to symbolically subordinate women to men; 'In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire *shall be* for your husband, And he shall rule over you' (Genesis 3:16, second sentence). Despite all feminist efforts to change it, this narrative of subordination is still deeply embedded in Judeo-Christian culture, if only at the levels of the symbolic and the unconscious. It feeds concerns and doubts about female leaders and their competence. By denying the relevance of gender, women in top leadership positions avoid the rarely articulated but still latent claim that women are unsuited to lead men.

The culturally circulated claim the women do meet is that they have been subject to affirmative action, which is taken as proof that they would not have measured up in terms of competence. As one participant put it: 'I'm glad I'm not subject to affirmative action.' This participant's reference to and dismissal of affirmative action measures is constitutive of the division between gender and professionalism. For gender to be rendered irrelevant to questioning female leaders' abilities, it also has to be established as irrelevant to bolstering their chances of success. This insistence on the sameness of men and women, and the dismissal of affirmative action, works to re-order the symbolic chaos implied by the mere existence of female leaders. This rhetorical move also answers the implicit question of how women should be understood: in precisely the same way as a man would be. These negotiations of gendered symbols from the Genesis narrative are indicative of the presence of divinity in the organization, a divinity ensuring that the selection of talents is fair and good, and this in turn serves to dismiss claims about the existence of illegitimate selection criteria.

The female managers' narratives emphasize that they prioritize work and like to take on bigger responsibilities. One says that she is not a mommy who makes the prettiest cupcakes. Another points out that she is not 'hanging out in cafés, drinking lattes'. They do knit, they bake and they cook. But they emphasize that work is their passion. They present themselves as professionals. Yet, they argue that professionalism is gender neutral: some women

and some men are truly devoted to their work. The Genesis lens makes it visible how this figure leans on God's creation of women and men in 'his image' in Genesis chapter 1, fearing and avoiding any associations with women's subordination in Genesis chapters 2 and 3. The female leaders keep strictly to the script of sameness, and state: 'This is not a question of gender, it's all about equality.'

How is a gender-neutral meritocracy built? God created the world step by step and 'There is a consciousness in the organization about building careers step by step,' says one CEO and economist:

> You're asked to step up … You're moved to where the organization needs you, and to fill holes in your CV. You ought to say yes to all opportunities, even though you may think that this does not fit your plans. Somebody has seen you and thought 'this person' is able to do this.
> (Vice president, non-technological education, aged 46)

Being recognized made the women proud and they expressed admiration and trust towards the organization that brought them into their positions. This emotion aligns them with their community, their organization, through the intensity of their attachments (Ahmed 2004: 117). This further augments the legitimacy of the organization and their loyalty. Yet, when selected, the talents still have to prove themselves worthy. They have to 'deliver', as the managers commonly phrase it. Being an identified talent by no means guarantees a leadership position. Leaders are literally constructed by the organization, and the insecurity that this process generates for the 'talent' justifies keeping the agenda hidden. This secrecy also keeps the acts of the managers diffuse enough to be cast as divine. For the internal recruitment of managers, which is the most common method, the recruitment process involves long-term development. It is part of a plan that appears sovereign, and the talents become gradually more involved in their own creation by shaping themselves according to the vision of the organization.

The Genesis of the female leader

The function of Genesis for, in this case, understanding gender in management, depends on its genre and status. Hummel (1986: 177) describes the task faced by Moses as formidable, because his people needed 'a new cosmogony to restructure their attitudes toward the created order'. The myth of Genesis does the work of creating such an origin story, which reorders the world itself through articulating its creation. The myth of Genesis includes cultural emblems and facilitates religious, spiritual, cultural, socio-economic and political concerns (Brenner 1993: 13). Kawashima (2012: 2) explains how the narrative form of Genesis outlines and isolates the story as a story. The story, and hence the cosmology, gradually becomes manifest. The 'he' emerges as the impersonal coherence of a *story* and the *story* in the end stands by itself.

The analysis above demonstrates how narratives of becoming a leader can be read through a theological lens, thereby bringing out the attribution of divine agency within an organization. Divinity can serve to unmark women as women, and make them appear to be 'the same' as men, because they have been part of the seemingly legitimate and sacred divisions in the mythical landscape of the organization. This assures their current positions as leaders, and sets them apart from their subordinates. Furthermore, the divisions made by organizations become narrative tools that negotiate the risk of woman-hood, which can be symbolized as the mark of Eve, suggesting that they lack qualifications and legitimacy. Analysing these narratives using Genesis as an analytical lens shows how these effects are brought about through distinctions that legitimate the existing organizations and hierarchies, and also dismiss the significance of gender differences.

On the other hand, as top leaders, these women also manage the companies' recruitment policies and practices. Do they also speak with gender-neutral rhetoric in their capacity as leaders themselves, or are they now conscious of gender differences? In the next section, I explore how the informants speak about their recruitment practices.

The gendered monster rears its ugly head?

As top leaders, the women I interviewed recruit new leaders and manage recruitment processes in their companies. I ask how gender surfaces in the material when women talk about themselves as being on the inside, taking part in recruitment processes. Can we still see the effects of the Almighty, the hand of God, in the narratives, or are the stories becoming more mundane and even gendered?

As I discussed above, most interviewees in these multinational companies presented the recruitment processes to which they themselves had been subjected as highly standardized, fundamentally gender-neutral processes of meritocracy. Others held that recruitment is all about gut feelings. As one participant noted: 'There are many odd requirements in the hiring process: character, suitability and intuition.' This statement suggests that hiring is administered by people with subjective preferences, and not by a non-distinguishing entity operating above and beyond any form of prejudice. In this section, I will explore narratives of the recruitment of leaders as practice. It outlines how the managers described the recruitment process: from seeing and selecting talents, via their development to the strategies for increasing the number of women in the end.

Looking for women in the name of 'diversity'

In one participant's company, the European CEO gathers the leaders of different business areas annually for updates and a new list of talents. 'They look for the extraordinary candidates, those who deliver more,' this participant

noted. I asked her how they actually do this, and what they are looking for. She responded that the leadership team 'looks beyond' what they see as typically male, self-promoting behaviour. They want to make sure they don't miss out on women and men who do not visibly stand out or promote themselves, because, as she put it, 'we want the best and we want diversity'. By using the term 'diversity', she is able to address gender without naming it as a specific concern and suggests that other forms of difference are also taken into account. In this context, diversity is (also) a placeholder for gender, and can be seen as a rhetorical tool that disembodies the speaker symbolically, while it highlights her alignment with the mythic 'organization', rather than her female body.

Another leader described how her team discusses recruitment policies in gender-neutral terms: 'We positively look for women, but treat everybody equally [because] we all practise homo-social recruitment. I admit that you tend to choose people resembling yourself.' In this quote, the participant suggests that 'looking for women' is a way of countering the unwanted effects of homosocial recruitment in a male-dominated leadership group. The organization actively pursues a strategy of bringing more women into the workforce, but the participant is careful not to describe these processes either as discrimination or as affirmative action. This balance is expressed by the insistence that '[we] treat everybody equally' on the one hand and monitor gender balance on the other.

The participants acknowledge that gender differences and bias negatively affect the gender balance in recruitment. People promote themselves in different ways and, whilst this applies to both women and men, many believe that men show more confidence than women. Consequently, they carefully look for and value a variety of characteristics that will favour women and counter this bias, which they know tends to favour the recruitment of men. Equality thus requires awareness and a widening of the leadership criteria, to make sure women do not lose leverage. The managers refuse to state that gender equality is a problem, but they do attend to the gender balance in various ways without making it a goal, as discussed below.

Gendered circumstances

While most interviewees were reluctant to talk about their companies' equality goals in terms of numbers, the HR departments keep track of gender and diversity in management positions and in the different fields of operation. In some cases, this tracking is encouraged by the governmental equality and anti-discrimination regulations,[5] which indicates that this is an efficient policy measure. One HR director says:

> We analysed the drilling area. We found that even though we thought we were able to secure diversity and make the top managerial level reflect the demographic composition of the production chain, this was not the

case. During a certain time-period, non-Norwegians were not entering the top managerial positions – they were too young and inexperienced – while women fell by the wayside – quit to enter green energy or stepped down for personal reasons. We had to actively formulate internal aims and goals to make sure we had candidates for all top-level positions – and fulfilled them.

The main requirement for a top-level position is to prove that you make profit in a position with budgetary responsibilities. This means that women have to get out of HR and service departments, because these are 'dead ends' as one of the leaders bluntly put it. Leaders thus steer candidates in the right directions:

> leadership potential is scrutinized in the short and long terms. Should they go abroad to gain experience? Will it be possible to organize this before they [the young women] want to have children, and will they be interested? Do they need to work in a different field and learn what's missing in their CV and how to organize this within a family life?

Leadership positions require skills that are formulated in individual terms. More than one of the women had experienced what they felt at the time to be a sideways move, or even being side-tracked. They later learned, often through their mentors, that they had been placed in these positions to acquire skills they lacked; they were offered tasks they were afraid they could not manage and in which they felt they had failed; they were asked to take on responsibilities for which they were not prepared, and sometimes ranked below the level suggested by their formal skills. The purpose was rarely revealed to them, as no superior would promise any promotion, yet the talents were expected to use these opportunities to both prove and develop themselves. One of the women explained that she had learned the hard way that the point was not necessarily to succeed, but to deal with the challenge and be able *not* to do your work to perfection, as some women are prone to think they have to. She pointed out 'This is the toughness of leadership – to maintain authority even when you fail', and despite the myth of the gender-neutral organization, she found this to be harder for women.

International experience is also considered necessary to becoming a leader. Many participants said that it tends to be more difficult for women than for men to take their partners abroad to acquire this experience, either before or after establishing a family. However, the long timeframe of leadership development allows time for planning, and for suggesting shorter stays abroad and alternative roads to international experience. It also means, they said, that a few years' absence to establish a family has limited significance. One participant pointed out that 'It's more important to plan maternal leave, and your return, with your manager.' Furthermore, establishing a family is not necessarily considered a drawback, and less so these days as tyounger men on

paternal leave has become more common, stimulated by state regulations, which make men's family duties visible. One leader recalled:

> When I was pregnant with my first child I was quite worried that nobody would want to work with me. However, my manager said to me: 'but this is the best thing that could happen to you, you will learn to be more efficient'. It is valued in the company; we know that people will establish families.

Equality hence comes to mean that ordinary life circumstances should not hold candidates back. This is spoken about as a gender-neutral issue, but it is closely related to feminist politics and the women-friendly Norwegian welfare system and labour-market regulations. A participant with management experience from abroad elaborates:

> I found it challenging to be a manager in [Country]. To have a family and a career does not have to conflict. Flexible hours are the main difference. In Norway, your delivery is more important than *when* you work – if you do it at home after putting the children to bed. In [Country] you had to be visible at work, to be a good manager you could not leave work before five. Here [in Norway] both women and men pick up from day-care – it feels good that everybody, the top manager included, leaves to pick up from the company kindergarten.
>
> (Project leader, non-technical education, aged 46)

Spending many hours at work is described as a 'dinosaur culture', yet it is considered worth mentioning that 'it feels good' if even 'the [male] top manager' leaves work to engage in caring tasks. This signals that the habit of valuing leaders by their presence has not entirely disappeared, and that men's families are still not highly visible at work. The leaders use men's caring responsibilities and paternal leave to argue the case that family-friendly policies are equality policies that benefit all employees, yet acknowledge that traditional family-friendly policies benefit women more than men.

These examples demonstrate that managers employ semi-neutral gender practices to pursue gender balance when recruiting employees, identifying talents and facilitating the processes that ultimately lead to them becoming top leaders. Such practices are seen in recruitment to the organization in general and in recruitment to management positions in particular, without understanding gender equality as company policy.

Assessing the performance of the talents is a task for managers. In the next section, I show how the managers run into problems when they experience what they see as women and men behaving differently or 'being different'. This shows that, despite the way in which the informants talk about the organization as gender neutral, they have to negotiate gender seen as difference.

Negotiating differences: practising gender

Gender differences play out in various situations and forms within these organizations. The senior leadership teams evaluate the progress of the talents but, as one of the women (vice president, non-technological education, aged 46) describes, it is easy to get trapped in evaluating women differently from men based on gendered expectations: 'I still sometimes experience that there might be traces of this "she has children, she has older parents"', leading to the assumption that women are not interested in promotions, new jobs, etc. due to family obligations. She then describes how there is an agreement among some leaders (a strategy) to make sure that they reject such comments from colleagues and emphasize that: 'that's a choice for the person to make. Would they ever say the same thing about a man?' They counter unequal treatment based on gendered assumptions, applying the standard of equality and focusing on the logic of sameness, which is the language available to them.

However, the managers' experience is that commonly more women than men turn away from a future career. When trying to explain this, one of the leaders ran into what she excused as her own stereotypical gendered thinking:

> I think women have an immanent respect for the requirements of the [management] role. I've been doing mapping of competence in the organization and find it fascinating how women and men evaluate their competence differently. Broadly speaking, men seem to be blessed with an 'ignorance and self-confidence' attitude.
>
> (Project leader, engineer, aged 50)

To her, a lack of confidence is more common among women than men, and becomes an essential difference, for which the managers compensate by applying wider and more diverse criteria that target men and women alike. Another woman brought up the importance of role models for women as well as having someone higher up in the system who recognizes you and works for your visibility:

> [It was] very important, at least to me, to have somebody knowing you, taking on a sponsor role. Maybe this is particularly important when there isn't an obvious match, that is … I was not the obvious choice for this position. The sponsor is a highly qualified person who stands up and expresses why he thinks you can do this job.
>
> (Vice president, non-technological education, aged 46)

The leaders also experience women as being less willing than men to prioritize the job in the way that is deemed appropriate, and enter into speculation about whether women are more inclined than men to spend time with their family, to want time for other interests and want fewer responsibilities in the

company. These concerns are excused, potentially seen as individual choices (still practised mostly by women) and followed by comments such as: 'I don't want to generalize.' This issue clearly makes the participants uncomfortable, but they are acutely aware of the gendered nature of leadership in their organizations. Some suggest the need for alternative stories of women in top management, and emphasize that 'It's perfectly possible to combine a demanding job with a family life without being a superwoman.' These women have two or more children, and point to themselves to prove that it is possible and worthwhile. This is a discussion of the leadership image modelled on and for men, a quest for alternative images of top leaders that make space for women in leadership, but also for alternative leadership images.

One CEO, an economist (aged 48), explained how this plays out among the managers: 'We don't talk openly about gender, but it's obvious in the discussion … that we want a good gender balance' and answered my question about what that means by saying: 'We're realists, engineers and economists: balance means 50–50, but we don't consciously put up numbers or make this our aim.' She wants to circumvent the impression, in the organization and beyond, that women are only promoted to fulfil company policy, although balance to her means 50–50. A former HR director (aged 50) reluctantly told me about an all-male technical department, and 'disclosed' the policy *en passant*:

> We're getting more and more pro-active … It starts with handling the external recruitment processes. We invite to interview and hire over-proportionally more women than men relative to the number of applications. We focus on people with non-Norwegian backgrounds as well. We want a certain percentage of women and a certain number of non-Norwegians in top management.

These narratives of organizational practices show how gender, as an experienced difference between women and men, enters the organizations. The contrast with the script of gender as likeness illustrated in the first part of the analysis is stark, but it is manageable when it can be turned into questions of (gender-neutral) equality or individual meritocracy. However, these experiences commonly create unease and become a space of danger when the leaders cannot openly manage the differences and address them in terms of inequality and feminist politics for organizations. They are left with the danger – monster – of gender difference being seen as subordination, which means that gender inequality is better left un-named.

Conclusion: gender obscured?

This chapter has attempted to understand the gender-denial discourse of meritocracy in gender and management. Previous studies have tended to blame women for the lack of equality in management by levelling the

accusation that they are following their own short-term interests while leaving
the systems unchanged, and hence reconstructing the masculine organization
(Miller 2004; Bastalich et al. 2007; Franzway et al. 2009; Mayes and Pini
2010). I have read the narrative of becoming a top manager through the myth
of Genesis and argue that narratives of becoming a leader are structured by
theological concepts. Three acts of division create and legitimize the existing
hierarchical order, establish the organization as gender-neutral and position
women as equal to men within the organization. This equality rests on Gen-
esis chapter 1, which presents women and men as being 'the same'. It does
not allow for differences between and among women and men, because the
only references to such differences occur in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, which
position women as subordinate. This leaves the managers with the concept
of equality – but no concept of gender. Furthermore, power in this
account is solely understood in terms of the legitimate hierarchy in the
organization and certainly not as conflicting and productive gendered
interests. This profoundly problematic relation to difference and hierarchies
in Judeo-Christian theology generates a subordinated 'other' position that
relates closely to that of the victim, a position that is unavailable and
unwanted, particularly within a neo-liberal discourse of individual choice and
meritocracy. Although not analysed here, we could ask if this latter is also
rooted in Judeo-Christian cosmology. The Judeo-Christian theology of gender
as either sameness or both difference and subordination 'forces' the managers
to keep to a prescribed storyline of hierarchies, management and gender-
neutral equality, which creates a dilemma when it meets the narratives of
women's recruitment practices.

The analysis of narratives of concrete practices demonstrates that gender
and gender differences saturate the organizations. The leaders insist on equal
treatment to address the experienced gender differences, while maintaining
gender-neutral language. They acknowledge gender structures and socio-
cultural gender differences, but have to turn them into individual questions,
issues of 'equality', and dismiss the rhetoric of gender difference involved in
affirmative action and gender-equality measures.[6] This gender neutralizing
feeds into the (problem-denying) discourse of Scandinavian countries as
gender equal (Skjeie and Teigen 2005). Moreover, the gender-neutral lan-
guage of equality restricts the usage of measures and policies that could
openly target gender imbalance (Wahl 2014; Miller 2004; Bastalich et al.
2007; Franzway et al. 2009; Mayes and Pini 2010). Targeting discriminatory
practices in masculine organizations in terms of gender difference and affir-
mative action would leave women in these situations forever at risk of sub-
ordination, because their position depends on a sameness that excludes
difference. However, their equality strategies are slowly increasing the number
of women in these organizations, bringing some practices of stereotypical
assessment out into the open and, more importantly, countering them in
practice. This function is still highly dependent on individual managers and

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hence fragile, even though the politics of monitoring gender and diversity is becoming an organizational routine.

This analysis offers an understanding of the logic of the gender denial and equality script found in many male-dominated organizations, and hopefully this can spur new discussions of how to manage and speak about gender and other differences. After all, managers are devoted to solving problems within their organization, even though these originate in cultural myths that lie outside the organization.

Whereas the script of Genesis chapter 1 'unmarks' women as different, insists on likeness and prescribes the irrelevance of gender in obtaining leadership positions, we have seen here that the gendered 'monster' lurks beneath the surface, recalling how, in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, Eve refused to be passive, searched for knowledge and was punished and placed in a subordinate position. Perhaps we can read Eve's opposition with a focus on how she made humans engage with knowledge, and Genesis chapter 1 on making humans 'in Our image, according to Our likenes [sic] … male and female He created them' as an invitation to think difference as non-hierarchical? Perhaps we need other myths on gender altogether? Or, perhaps a less idealistic narrative that includes opposition and activism, the search for new knowledge and an understanding of gender as changing and flexible is necessary in order to challenge the ideas of gender-neutrality, meritocracy and equality that currently dominate in these organizations?

Notes

1 The data were partly compiled as part of a research project by Bye et al. (2016), commissioned by the Norwegian Oil and Gas Association.
2 The Church of Norway is an Evangelical Lutheran Christian church and was a state church until 2012.
3 The Biblical text quotes are from New King James Version ® Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, unless included as part of quotes from other scholars. The italics in the scripture indicate that the word is added in the translation, and could not be found in the original texts. Footnotes and material accompanying the text are not included.
4 Such statements can be read as a (partial) solution to the in/visibility paradox (Faulkner 2009: 181), through which women become invisible as professionals and hyper-visible as women.
5 www.ldo.no/en/.
6 As also found by Wahl (2014).

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