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Women, Leadership, and Change – Navigating between Contradictory Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how women in top leader positions navigate between the two contradictory cultures of masculinity and femininity and, in particular, if and how these positionings and negotiations develop over time. Drawing on working-life biographical interviews with women on the top of organizational hierarchies within the crisis management systems in the Nordic countries, the article illustrates women top leaders relating to norms of masculinity and femininity, demonstrating how these have shaped their roles as top leaders, and how these have shifted along their careers. It shows how, in the beginning of their careers, women in organizations marked by cultures of masculinity conform to these gendered norms, while in their roles as top leaders, they do gender differently and assume roles as change agents. The findings suggest that processes of navigation between organizational cultures of masculinity and societal cultures of femininity can be better understood when individual experiences are situated within their gendered social and cultural expectations.

Introduction

Women on the top of organizational hierarchies are few, and research on their experiences is correspondingly scarce (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a). Being in a minority, they attract attention and their appearances are scrutinized and compared to characteristics expected of a leader. The role of leaders is traditionally interlinked with images of masculinity, assuming capabilities and qualities associated with men (Collinson & Hearn, 1996), while the surrounding societal culture leans towards assumptions about women as caretakers and mothers (Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002) and "respectable" femininity (Mavin & Grandy, 2016b). In this intersection, women leaders balance and navigate between contradictory cultures. The Nordic countries, setting of the present study, are well known for high levels of gender equality within the labour market and in society at large (Teigen & Skjeie, 2017) due to political and structural changes, such as dual-breadwinner models (e.g. Kitteröd & Pettersen, 2006). Efforts to promote gender equality have been initiated also within Nordic public sector organizations like rescue services, the Police, and Armed forces (Finstad, 2014; Grip, Engström, Krekula, & Karlsson, 2016; Inzunza, 2015; Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Nevertheless, gendered patterns prevail across sectors, occupations, tasks, and roles (e.g. Bettio & Verashchiagina 2009; Sainsbury, 1999) and require insights into how the two contradictory cultures of masculinity and femininity are negotiated, in particular within the crisis management area.

This study takes interest in one of the last bastions in terms of upholding and reproducing male domination and masculine norms (Carreiras, 2006; Goldstein, 2001; Persson, 2011). Our research was conducted across five government agencies in the emergency and crisis management sectors in the Nordic countries. The empirical data consists of working-life biographical interviews with a total population of women leaders holding the highest possible positions in organizational hierarchies, exploring their experiences of their working life careers, and balancing between the conflicting cultures of masculine leadership ideals and societal expectations of femininity. The aim of this paper is to explore how women on top leader positions navigate between the two contra- dictory cultures and, in particular, if and how these positionings develop over time. The article analyses how tensions between masculine and feminine ideals played out in practicings of gender, and how these practices have altered over time. Our theoretical understandings build on literature of leadership gendered as masculine, and regard gender as a complexity of power relations consisting of processes (re)constructed in organizational everyday practices (Acker, 1990, 2006; Van den Brink, Holgersson, Linghag, & Deé, 2016). More specifically, we regard gender as some- thing that can be done well, or appropriately in relation to her sex category, and differently, through multiple, and concurrent, enactments of femininity and masculinity (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). The presented study illustrates the ways in which women top leaders do gender in their everyday practices, which appears related to their personal developments accompanying the increased levels of experience and competence. Focusing on women leaders who perform gender diverging from reproduction of homosocial patterns, the study further extends research on elite leaders as change- agents (Kelan & Wratil, 2020; Wahl, 2014).

The article is structured as follows. The following section begins with an overview of previous research on the fields of gender in relation to organization and leadership, and closes with our theoretical starting points. Then, the research setting, our data and methodology are presented, followed by the empirical findings outlining processes of change in women top leaders' gendered navigations. The article is concluded with a discussion of the main contributions.

Theoretical overview

Practicings of gender are deeply embedded in historical, social, and cultural contexts, and offer certain margins for manoeuvres, indicating which activities should or may be enacted in keeping with organizational cultures. Performed within social interactions, often unreflectively, the practis- ing of gender affects women and men in different ways (Martin, 2006), permeating concepts and institutions such as competence, leadership, or rationality (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Gherardi, 1994; Glass & Cook, 2020; Martin, 2006; Van den Brink et al., 2016). In this vein, leadership positions have mainly been occupied by men. As a consequence, images of masculinity, related to autonomy and result orientation, or appearance, a certain tone of voice, or particular ways of communication, have constituted the norms of leadership (Andersen & Bloksgaard, 2008; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Holgersson, 2013; Meriläinen, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2015; Van den Brink et al., 2016). These norms exclude women, but also men who do not identify with, or correspond to, hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995).

Leadership ideals describe features that compose normative qualities of leaders in specific sectors and vary spatially, over time, and with types of organization (Tienari et al., 2002). Ideal features are only in part formalized, such as requirements of certain degrees. Many are informal, directed towards evoking behaviours that harmonize with the organizational culture (Peterson, 2007) and vary along with gendered expectations, also within one occupation or role (Acker, 1990, 2006). For instance, competences, personality traits and potential among ideal candidates for positions as executives, IT consultants, and university professors tend to favour men (Lund, 2012; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Peterson, 2007; van den Brink & Benshop, 2012; Van den Brink et al., 2016). Furthermore, result orientation and career ambitions are reflected differently in women's and men's constructions of career ambitions and opportunities (e.g. Wahl, 2014). Here, individual

development, mastery of tasks, upward career mobility and ambition as a resource have been identified as discourses of ambition. While ambition as a resource was particularly valued by senior managers and enmeshed with notions of masculinity, constructions of ambition, as expressed by women, were less appreciated (Benshop et al., 2013). Moreover, organizational discourses concerning women's and men's diverging career potential affect both women's and men's self-images and views of their potential. A Swedish study demonstrated how men were considered possessing a nearly unlimited career potential and expected a career, while women, whose career potential was considered more limited, hoped for a career (Linghag, 2009). In line with this, competence tends to be a homosocial practice, (re)defining competence according to male candidates who are found to represent desired traits (Holgersson, 2013).

Similar practicesfor instance, of women acquiring higher levels of formal competencies to prove themselves more skilled than the men do in their workplaces, are particularly salient in male-dominated organizations like rescue services (Batty & Burchielli 2011) and armed forces (Pettersson, Persson, & Berggren, 2008). The crisis management system, including the interpretative prerogative of risk and crisis, is masculine coded, stemming from military organization and ideals (e.g. Cowper, 2000; Grip et al., 2016). This becomes evident in the field of risk and crisis management, which may be described as a chain of cause and effect. The chain is gendered from risks and disasters' impact on women and men, to the arrangements and roles of crisis management systems and organizations, inclusive of their related professional roles (Ericson & Mellström, 2016), not least concerning images of leadership (Cowper, 2000). The sector's hyper-masculine ideals have been described as exclusionary, a "cult of masculinity" and cultivating "heroism" (Ellingsen & Lilleaas, 2020; Ericson, 2016; Silvestri, 2017). Although such normative ideals may be less salient in more strategic agencies involved in crisis preparedness work (Ericson, 2020), they affect women in operative activities in general, as well as in leading positions in particular. Taken together, performances of gender, navigating between ideals of masculinity and femininity, is a delicate balance for many women.

Moreover, widespread societal assumptions about women as caretakers and mothers contradict the unconditional commitment to the job associated with notions of the "ideal worker" or "ideal elite leader" (Andersen & Bloksgard, 2008). A common construction when navigating between the "ideal worker" and societal expectations of the good mother is that of the "good mother" among the employed mothers was that of an "extensive" mother, one who delegated caregiving onto others (Christopher, 2012). For women with careers, such strategies illustrate tensions between dedication to work or family (Hochschild, 1997). Following this, many women choose jobs and roles that more easily combine with household responsibilities although they may negatively affect their career development, technological expertise and confidence (Holth, Bergman, & MacKenzie, 2017). Furthermore, gender and age intersect. In addition to experiencing more hindrances and interruptions in their career paths due to childbearing and caregiving responsibilities, cultural ideas about femininity tend to vary according to women's age. Although women managers have been found to enjoy the advantages of experience and seniority, acknowledging self-confidence, increased control and empowerment, and gendering practices within organizations and careers tend to be interovwen with ageism. More specifically, women are regarded as "old" already in their 40s, and older women's knowledge tends to be less valued than that of older men (Jyrkinen, 2014).

Importantly, practicings of gender do not represent fixed positions. Rather, it is an ongoing, recurrently negotiated social process, distinguishing between men and masculinities, and women and femininities. Within this process, gender structures are produced and reproduced in social practices (West & Zimmerman, 1987; 2009). It has been argued that gender, due to an increasing complexity and fluidity, can be undone (Due Billing, 2011). In line with Kelan (2010), Lewis (2014) Mavin and Grandy (2012, 2016a, 2016b) and West & Zimmerman (2009), we regard the binary divide between masculinity and femininity as constitutive in experiences of doing gender. Following this, we believe that the binary can be challenged but that, rather than being undone, gender can be done in different ways. This has been denoted in terms of juggling, or gender

gymnastics, and in discerning forms of femininities such as entrepreneurial femininities (Lewis, 2014) and Mavin & Grandy's (2016a) concept of "respectable business femininity". Key insights that can be drawn from such conceptual analyses are that in addition to doing gender while navigating between ideals of masculinity and femininity, women leaders are required to perform gender well and, perhaps in particular in male-dominated organizations like those constituting emergency and crisis management sector, differently. Hence, for a woman leader, doing gender well entails an evaluation against her sex category, and expectations on feminine behaviours and a bodily feminine appearance. When doing gender differently, femininity and masculinity are enacted at the same time (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Doing gender well, performing feminine masculinities and masculine femininities, tends to intersect with the spatial context and other positions of privilege, such as class and heterosexuality (Lazlo Ambjörnsson, 2021). Following Mavin and Grandy's (2012) call for exploring the implications of opportunities and experiences of doing gender well and differently among women leaders in larger organizations, this paper explores how women top leaders of large government agencies navigate between two contradictory cultures and, in particular, if and how these positionings develop over time. These issues are explored below, following a discussion of the methodology and background to the study.

Methods

The study was conducted within the crisis preparedness and management sector. In the Nordic countries, gender equality is high despite slight differences with regard to economic equity, where the gender balance is the highest among Swedish population, and the lowest among the Danish (Teigen & Skjeie, 2017), and parental leave, where Finnish men's parental leave is the lowest (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2015). Yet, following the introduction of generous gender equality policies in Iceland, while public day care services are provided generously, the availability of those services tends to be low or non-existent at the end of the parental leave (Farstad, 2015). This Icelandic example illustrates that the structures of opportunities shaping parental practices, which in turn have implications for gender equality structures, vary among the Nordic countries (Ellingsaeter, 2006). Furthermore, gender relations may diverge along the lines of the local context (Forsberg & Stenbacka, 2017), class and sexuality (Laszlo Ambjörnsson, 2021), and accordingly reproduced or challenged. Parallels to such regional variations may likely be drawn to differences between sectors on the labour market.

In the Nordic countries, the crisis preparedness and management sector typically consists of a governmental agency responsible for civil protection and emergency planning. The implementation of policies is usually delegated to regional and municipal levels who, in combination with so-called blue light organizations, such as the police, fire departments and emergency services, comprise the sector. In a broad perspective, the sector additionally consists of organizations engaged in national and international protection and security of its citizens, including armed forces, coastal administration, directorate for civil protection and ministry of sea rescue. In all Nordic countries, the sector is male-dominated and characterized by norms of masculinity (Mellström & Ericson, 2016). During the past decades, its organizations have experienced an increasing number of women and accordingly, organizations like police and armed forces promote gender equality and diversity (Ellingsen & Lilleaas, 2020; Finstad, 2014; Persson & Sundevall, 2019; Pettersson et al., 2008). Still, traditional masculine ideals prevail. For instance, within the Swedish Rescue services, women are believed to lack the job's physical requirements (Grip et al., 2016), which is expressed within the Finnish Armed forces as inferiority of the female body (Kouri, 2021). Among Danish and Swedish police and police recruits, gendered conceptions of competencies prevail (Andersen & Bloksgaard, 2008; Haake, 2017). Such patterns can also be found on leading positions among the police and the armed forces (Haake, 2017; Pettersson et al., 2008). Against this background, the Nordic context with its high gender equality and hyper-masculine crisis management sector compose a suitable research context for exploring how women on top leader positions navigate between the two contradictory cultures of masculinity and femininity.

The study examines working life biographical interviews with a total population of the women who had reached top positions within the crisis management system. Biographical interviews aim at inquiring into subjective, individual experiences and involve a review of those experiences, and allow their voices "to be heard, analysed, and theorised" (Atkinson, 1998, p.19), enabling participants to exert more control over what is discussed in the interview situation (Roberts, 2002). It has been argued that when speaking about past experiences with such added insights, the experienced situations and involved gendered elements may be described in a more politically correct way (e.g. Holgersson, 2013). Yet, for natural reasons, memories constitute an aspect of construction of the self through introspection (Thompson & Bornat, 2017). Hence, retrospective accounts include recurrent considerations and (re)constructing the self. Reviews of previous perceptions and actions in juxtaposition to current observations and strategies may lead to new insights, added to memories of gender relations, which follow the aim of this article.

The sample consists of five women leaders in their middle years. At the time of the interviews, they had reached positions at the highest possible top of organizational hierarchies within the crisis management systems in the Nordic countries. The risk of recognition is prominent, particularly in small democracies like the Nordic. For reasons of anonymity, details around the sample (names, titles, organizations, or date of interviews) are thus left out. However, biographical interviews entail for qualitative information about the participants concerning their careers, their approaches to gender during their working life careers and in the interviews and their retrospective accounts for their roles as mothers, issues that may contextualize their experiences. Conducted in the 2010s at locations of convenience for the participants, the face-to-face interviews were semi-structured. Each interview lasted between 45 and 65 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. Interviews started with grand tour questions about their working life biographies and their careers to becoming a top leader. The interviews allowed for the participants to deepen certain issues and avoiding others, admitting thematic variations in the data.

Analysis involved systematic coding of the data and developing meaningful themes. Throughout, the process of analysis was iterative, shifting between empirical data and theoretical reflections. In a primary round of coding, themes identifying a wide spectrum of experiences were captured, for instance, career, competencies, emotions, and parenthood. In a secondary round of coding, categories and patterns were generated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These revolved around norms of masculinity. Tensions were revealed when juxtaposing masculine leadership ideals to issues associated with femininity, such as appearance, conversation topics in the workplace, or motherhood, thus mirroring societal expectations and common gendered practices in everyday life. We chose to explore those tensions by focusing our analysis on how the participants navigated between the two contradictory cultures of masculinity and femininity within the context of leadership.

The analysis is presented along experiences relating to ideals of masculinity and femininity, respectively. The first theme outlines how respectability is negotiated and performed by leaning towards and questioning masculine leadership ideals, building on reflections of insecurities and exclusion. In the second, societal expectations of femininity are reflected in statements encircling appearance and care, expectations that constituted challenges in the pursuit of a career. Together, the two themes illustrate a process, outlining a path consisting of recurrent deliberations about navigating between the conflicting cultures and expectations.

Findings

Practicings of competence and ambition

Cultures of masculinity comprised central elements in the interviews. Prominent elements include experienced marginalization, and difficulties with matching the standards of what was perceived as a sufficient level of competency. Reflected upon by highlighting problematic consequences of

gender inequality, or by comparison with men, revealed practicings of norms and value systems that confirm the validity of the discourses. Marginalization was expressed as homosocial behaviours:

> Perhaps there is a bit . . . arrogance. I don't have the feeling that I am not listened to. But I have experienced that, for instance, a meeting was called to, which I was not invited to. And then they ask, 'Where are you?' . . . Sometimes it's that kind of boys' club. (P-4)

These practicings of gender are assumed to be caused by inattention rather than the results of a secret agenda. Still, experiences of marginalization, due to "both thoughtlessness and things with ulterior motives" (P-4) have led to an awareness of exclusion consisting of an array of everyday life trivia. Many of those were related to issues of competence and career. In the beginning of their careers, differences appeared situational. Over the years, patterns emerged, causing questioning and expressions of opposition. For instance, a common theme in relation to career was a history of outspoken and high ambitions, and having worked hard for reaching positions as top leaders. This was, as was described in the interviews, often harder than for men on similar positions:

> We used to say to each other 'Imagine how skilled we will be when we are 40 years old. We will probably have worked twice as hard as the boys'. And I believe that so we have. (P-3)

These women perceived having put in more effort than men on the same level. Comparing themselves with the men in their workplaces, participants perceived they needed a higher level of formal competencies, and proved themselves more skilled in order to receive the professional respect that the men obtained.

> I understood early that to earn legitimacy as a non-officer and a woman, I needed to understand also the practical aspects of the job. I invested a lot of time in learning what they do in the [special branch]. (P-5)

Following homosocial practice, competence tends to be defined according to ideals (Holgersson, 2013), accentuated in male-dominated organizations such as rescue services and armed forces (Batty & Burchielli, 2011; Pettersson et al., 2008), to which these participants belong. In addition to being a skilled leader in a bureaucracy, this participant thus felt she required higher levels of knowledge about practicians' work in her branch in order to receive respect for her competence. Acquisition of this knowledge was taken on informally as a means for managing the then position. Steering towards a career however, formal training required for higher positions was acquired while still in junior positions. Training was taken seriously and conducted thoroughly without short cuts, with the purpose of achieving a more than sufficient level of competencies and qualifications even before assuming office. The importance of sequential acquisition of required skills was emphasized repeatedly; only after learning and mastering, one skill, excel to the next level was imagined a possibility. Hence, despite outspoken ambitions on a career, their self-images were entwined with organizational discourses about women's and men's diverging career potential (Linghag, 2009) and corresponding levels of skills.

Being well organized and having studied issues to be presented or discussed in upcoming meetings thoroughly constitutes another example of organizational discourses demanding higher levels of preparedness from women: "I used much more time to prepare back then. You definitely did not want to be found ill-prepared" (P-3). Here, an element of change is discernible. Being prepared constituted part of a process connected to a growing experience and age. Years of experience in leading positions, and of identity work, lead to a change from adaptation to masculine leadership ideals to distancing from them:

> I spent more time on preparations when I was 27 than now, in my 50s. I used to be afraid of making mistakes or taken by surprise. So, I read a lot . . . I have read a *lot*. Thankfully, I am good at getting the overall picture quickly only by reading the summary, people that know me will confirm that, years of accumulated experience. Today I do not need to read as much as I used to. (P-3)

Learning and developing in their roles as leaders, for example by use of a coach, was an ongoing process highlighted as vital also for the women in positions as top leaders. One way to meet perceived shortcomings was a constant eagerness to learn and pursue formal education such as

leadership courses. In many cases, this stemmed from a perception that women not only represent themselves but also women in general, which increased the pressure of demonstrating competence and skills. This development emerged even more clearly by another participant, as she considered the experience by not being capable enough:

> As a young co-worker, and a young leader, it was much more important to me that everything would be really good, and I was prepared for and vulnerable to things not being good enough and that I did not perform well enough. [...] I think less about those things now. I suppose that is a development, and of course, I have more experience as a leader and in addition, also received some formal training. (P-1)

Illustrating incessant contemplation related to masculine leadership ideals, the interviews display a process from adaptation to norms of masculinity and appurtenant levels of preparedness and competence to disengagement with these norms stemming from experience and seniority. Over time, norms were increasingly questioned as reasons for (unequal) opportunities: "There should be space for everyone, not someone getting advantages on the expense of someone else under pretences of objectivity. [...] The gender dimension ... you just can't ignore it" (P-2). Hence, several experiences related to gender were perceived as negative, such as perceptions of repressive techniques provoking anger, in addition to being energy draining. One participant expressed how these experiences had taught her to approach similar situations differently: "Had it happened to me when I was younger, I probably would have remained passive. Now I get furious and punch back. Immediately" (P-2). This could be understood as a development from conformity with the masculine culture and expectations to opposition, where she ceased to accept gender-related inequalities.

Hesitating to protest overtly, there were examples of alternative forms of resistance to the reproduction of masculine ideals. A common observation among the participants was that women, themselves or other women rarely aspire for leading positions. A common subject in their interviews was that of the careers of other women in their organizations, which often was supported:

> I have seen some really competent female co-workers, whom I actively asked to apply for a leading position. [...] If you want women in on higher levels, you actively need to approach them. (P-2)

The reason for the perceived need to support other women in their advancement was depicted either as a lack of confidence related to a common view of women being less ambitious, or as a result of organizational culture being less encouraging to womens' ambitions (Benschop et al., 2013). "Hey, this is good enough. If you were a man, you would have been done a long time ago" (P-3) was something one informant said to a woman colleague. Another example is the following:

> I sat down with these women, and thoroughly read the advertisement for the position. 'So in which of these areas are you unqualified?' 'Item eight and nine.' 'Right, but you have the first seven, and item ten. Eight in total. Which one of your male colleagues ticks off even seven of these items?' (P-2)

Taken together, the retrospective accounts were permeated with experiences of attempts to reach management ideals consisting of standards set by masculine ideals, requiring relentless considerations and (re)positionings between notions of masculinity and expectations of femininity (see Lewis, 2014). Such tensions also included their female appearances (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a). Leaning against experience and seniority, these top leaders used their positions and power to change structures of gendered inequality.

Accounts of appearance and caring

In parallel with the reproduction of masculine leadership ideals, discourses of femininity entailing expectations from the surrounding social reality were salient. Depictions of these cultures primarily encircled appearances, and caring. When accounting for issues of appearance, participants remembered how they constantly made deliberations about how to dress keeping the right balance between what they would have liked to wear and what they thought they ought to wear to make the

competent and professional impression they aimed for. Appearance was also spoken of in terms of communicative skills. Issues like how to express oneself with an adequate amount of words, or choosing an adequate tone, engaged the participants in extensive reflections and led some to practise and cultivate these skills:

> I have spent 25 years teaching myself what to say, how to finish a sentence just in time, making a short and accurate statement. Often I rehearse in the car, I speak loudly to myself until I know what to say and can leave the room without confusion about what I meant!! You have to do it repeatedly. A media course may of course help, but it won't make you any good. You need to practice. (P-2)

Adequate ways to communicate and express oneself are anchored in masculine coded communication patterns regarding brief but eloquent announcements. Men were believed to have a more "authoritarian profile, appearing more self-confident, and more like 'I know this'" (P-5). In contrast, some participants position themselves as opposites from the masculine norm: "I am not commanding or dominating, and I do not have a very loud and noisy voice. I don't feel that I need to anymore" (P-2). Consequently, the desire to move away from "using too many" words could be interpreted as a distance from communication patterns that are traditionally associated with women. What is reflected here is the participants' juggling between masculine and feminine ideals (Lewis, 2014).

Femininity has, historically, been accompanied by expectations of caring. In the non-work sphere, yet also largely intersecting with organizational culture, expectations of femininity concerned the role of motherhood (Tienari et al., 2002). Constituting an extensive topic in the interviews, family was an issue that was perceived as a risk of impeding careers to top-management positions. Dual roles were described as a hindrance for women who, despite being mothers, want a career. A common strategy was the separation of the roles of work, and motherhood was undertaken by planning: "I never have early meetings if I can avoid it, since mornings are family time" (P-5). This participant illustrates readiness for meeting work-related demands, thus displaying dedication required for making, and maintaining, a career corresponding to the 'ideal elite leader (Andersen & Bloksgaard, 2008). At the same time, underscoring how the children were prioritized, expectations of caring were met. This dilemma was described in the following way: "I think they [the children] think I always worked a lot. But I also believe a lot of people think of me as a mother hen" (P-1). Hence, an emphasis on "always [having] been present for the children in all their activities over the years", permeated the interviews. In addition to these common traits, two different approaches to navigating between ideals of career and motherhood were represented. One approach was a "good enough"-principle. As one participant explained:

> I have not been the one who has raised her hand first and said, 'I'd like to bake for the parent meeting or sport activity'. I sat quiet and I bought confect instead. (P-2)

Here, buying confect represents conformity to expectations of engaging in children's activities, while distancing from ideals of femininity composed of large amounts of unpaid household work. A further strategy was to extend her motherhood duties to delegating caregiving to her husband (see Christopher, 2012). Reflecting about the division of responsibilities and balancing between gendered ideals, this participant positioned herself outside societal expectations of maternity ideals:

> I have observed a pattern here over the years. When a married couple [both working in the force] has children, it is always her who will have the longest maternity leave and work reduced hours for a couple of years when the kids are young. Meanwhile, he will continue his climb for promotion. I keep asking myself: why? (P-2)

Regardless of approach, these diverging constructions of motherhood mirrored societal expectations of femininity, indicating that the mother is the one who is responsible for the children. Taken together, navigating between work-related demands stemming from cultures of masculinity, and non-work related expectations of caring comprised tensions. Others distanced themselves from the

notion of abandoning career ideals in favour of motherhood via different strategies. In both cases, there was a consensus in the interviews that combining career and family life was possible, but required hard work.

Discussion

This paper has explored how positionings and negotiations related to gendered social practices develop over time. A common thread in these retrospective accounts is the element of construction of the self (Thompson & Bornat, 2017), which includes juxtaposition not only to masculine leadership ideals but also to the younger self and her strategies at the time. The retrospective accounts contained elements of critique towards both cultures throughout the participants' biographies. Still, beginnings of careers were characterized by an absence of open disagreement. In the participants' early careers, the positionings consist of initial conformity with norms of masculinity, via gradual questioning and distancing from them, to combining elements from both cultures having distilled the most efficient strategies of gendered manoeuvring (cf. Mavin & Grandy, 2016a). Parallels can be drawn to corporate feminism, a notion encircling individualism, entrepreneurialism, choice and merits, but also refraining from "alienating" men (Lewis & Simpson, 2017). Refraining from objection or confrontation was perceived as a prerequisite for becoming respected for their competences and skills, and thus advancement within the organization. Changes in the reproduction of masculinity cultures within rescue services, police organizations and armed forces are, although discernible, tenuous (Carreiras, 2006; Goldstein, 2001; Kouri, 2021; Persson, 2011) even with efforts to promote gender equality (Finstad, 2014; Grip et al., 2016; Inzunza, 2015; Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Adaptations, such as apparent conformity with prevalent norms, thus indicate that doing gender well (Mavin & Grandy, 2012) contributed to enabling their careers.

In parallel, surrounding societal cultures entails expectations of femininity encircling discourses of care. Here, motherhood constituted an area of juggling between dedication to their career and their children. The varied constructions of motherhood indicate a dynamic shift in previously static roles. Yet, assumptions about women as mothers disharmonize with notions of career orientation and commitment to work. Future research should consider exploring tensions between normative ideals of masculinity and femininity by relying on a life course framework (Clausen, 1998; Moen & Sweet, 2004) to gain even deeper insights concerning what events and gendered practices during occupational careers shape leadership and affect their career trajectories. By contrast, at the time of the interviews, the participants had reached seniority and top leader positions. They enjoyed benefits of a working life of experience and knowledge, resulting in feeling well prepared without being over-prepared, and less doubtful about their appearances or decisions. They also enjoyed having personalized the gendered aspects of their roles as leaders, enacting masculinities and femininities simultaneously. These personalized strategies could be denoted as doing gender differently (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Still, although challenging gendered norms of leadership, their doings of gender differently remained within the socially acceptable.

The variation in their experiences was not descriptions of fixed positions. Rather, they developed over time and included moving back and forth in positionings and entailed contradictions and cognitive dissonance. For instance, such development involved the construction of new leadership ideals, incorporating expressions of femininity into their performances as leaders, and references to these transformations were often accompanied by expressions of self-confidence and distancing from expectations of masculinity ideals. References to temporality gained significance over time. Repeatedly, references to temporal events emerged also when less motivated in terms of chronological structurings of biographical depictions. This complexity of experiences, reflections, and constructions was represented in all interviews, demonstrating the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of deliberations and practices. Despite a wide range of experiences and conceptions of gendering practices, the material entailed shared experiences in the biographical accounts for their careers, and their positionings related to cultures of masculinity and femininity.

This paper has explored how women in top leader positions navigate between the two contradictory cultures and, in particular, if and how these positionings and negotiations develop over time. It has shown how women in organizations marked by cultures of masculinity do gender well and do gender differently in their roles as top leaders, assuming roles as change agents. The findings suggest that processes of navigation between organizational cultures of masculinity and societal cultures of femininity can be better understood when individual experiences are situated within their gendered social and cultural expectations.

While formal structures of inequality can be altered through political intervention, cultures of inequality sustained by informal structures are more difficult to impinge upon. Importantly, however, openings for change exist. Research has demonstrated the role of men as change agents (e.g. Kelan & Wratil, 2020; Wahl, 2014), as well as views of merit and competence in contexts of promotion and recruitment (Van den Brink et al., 2016; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014), and evaluations (Andersen & Bloksgaard, 2008; Peterson, 2007; Vroman & Danko, 2020). This article has shown how women do gender differently in their roles as top leaders. In a long-term perspective, such demonstrations of altering images of ideal leaders and constructions of motherhood may contribute to altered ideals. In addition, and more actively seeking to change, they assumed roles as change agents. First, in order to balance the unequal structure of opportunities, they purposely approached and encouraged women in the organization who hesitantly considered applying for advancement. Second, they attempted to counteract these women's tendencies towards overwork and over-qualification by normalizing standards by which they are measures.

Taken together, these empirical observations contribute to understanding change via change agents, but also to the process towards, as a woman in a sector dominated by cultures of masculinity, becoming a change agent. Intentions and actions targeting gendered structures as highlighted in this study contain elements of reflexivity, elementary in practicings of gender that encompass the potential of profoundly changing prevalent power structures (Martin, 2006). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Contu (2008), practices of resistance operating within what is socially acceptable rarely change power relations. Hence, more insights into processes of transforming organizational cultures of unequal power structures are required.

Disclosure statement

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