

(SP) EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS – A SCANDINAVIAN COMPARISON

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Introduction

The Scandinavian countries are often perceived as being broadly similar even if there are significant differences between them in political, institutional and cultural terms. This is, for example, evident when we examine the welfare system of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which is described as “a social-democratic welfare model” (Esping Andersen, 1990). This model is based upon values of solidarity, i.e. it tries to reduce class differences and has as its key goal the absence of poverty. The approach to gender equality in the Scandinavian context is characteristic of this model (Leira, 1992). Women have gradually become integrated into the various political, social and economic spheres in these countries. This leads us to pose the question ‘Why do the differences in equal opportunities in sport in Scandinavian countries exist and how do such inequalities manifest themselves? This paper reports on a research project entitled “Women at the Top” which had as its aim to document and analyse the reasons why women are underrepresented in leading positions in the world of sport in Scandinavia.

Methods

In Sweden, Denmark and Norway the surveys were almost identical with a few national adaptations. The survey was first carried out in Denmark in 2003 (Ottesen, Habermann & Pfister, 2005) achieving a response rate of 54%. In Sweden (Habermann 2005) and Norway (Skirstad & Rimeslåtten, 2005) the survey was undertaken in 2004 with a response rate of 54% and 61% respectively. In three countries representatives of the sport federations, the district associations and the national executive board of the main sport organization were targeted as respondents. They are all elected voluntary leaders. The Norwegian survey was web-based (using ‘Questback’), and Sweden and Denmark postal surveys were used.

Results

Danish equal opportunities policy in general over the last 30 years has been described as “fundamentally narrower in its political agenda, weaker in its organisational capacity and possessing a reactive strategy, in contrast to both Sweden and Norway” (Borchorst & Dalerup, 2003:53). This can also be applied to the sport organisations. Quotas have never been seen as desirable. This reflects the official Danish equal opportunities policy, which combines an individual actor perspective with a liberal perspective of choice. This is in contrast to the Swedish and Norwegian structural perspective, with the emphasis on collective responsibility. In Denmark also the interference from the State is absolute absent. Having three Danish sport organisations has not contributed to equal opportunities – perhaps rather the opposite. The Norwegian as well as the Swedish strategy has been more proactive. Norway introduced quotas in

the sport organization in 1987, and the Swedes never did, but they forwarded goals which they aimed to fulfil. The latest plan on equality questions in Sweden is from 2005, and in 2009 there shall at least be 40 % females. As we can see, the Swedes place equal opportunities on the agenda and they focus on structural problems.

In Scandinavia, women and men do sport to the same degree, but more men than women are members of the sport organisations. This of course may explain some of the gender inequality. This difference between the number of members in the organization and in the boards is the least in Norway compared to Sweden and Denmark. Nordic volunteer leaders in sport can be said to have a fairly uniform profile. They are predominantly male, and 40-60 years of age. In Sweden, there are fewer younger and older persons who are sports leaders than in the two other countries. Volunteers have a high level of education, especially the women, a high income, and often occupy a managerial position in their daily work. The voluntary sport leader is typically married or living with a partner, often has children living at home, and is almost always a citizen of a Scandinavian country. Sports leaders participate in sport themselves for about 4 to 5 hours a week and spend the same amount of time on their voluntary work. Despite all these similarities, the issue of equal opportunities is looked upon quite differently in the three countries.

The questions about the attitudes to equal opportunities reveal more clearly their differences. More than two thirds of the voluntary sport leaders in Sweden and Norway feel equal opportunities are important for the sport organisation. In Norway, it is a significant gender difference. Only a fourth of female leaders and almost half of the men were satisfied with the existing gender distribution in sport.

In Denmark, the equal opportunities are treated as relatively unimportant, and the normal attitude might be described as “relaxed” or indifferent” to this area of policy. Almost two thirds of the men and more than half of the female leaders expressed this attitude. Danish sport leaders are not very engaged in improving the situation of female representation on the boards of sports organisations. Women’s representation in such positions varies from 22% to 0 % in the three Danish central sport organizations. 40 % of the Danish sport leaders (both men and women) felt that the composition of the board was satisfactory as it was. The level of concern reported by men in relation to this is greater than that reported by women strangely enough. Male Danish sport leaders do, however, tend to support the view that the main barrier to women’s representation in such roles is that of women’s own choices rather than a structural obstacle. In Sweden and Norway a majority supported alteration in the gender composition of the boards. There is a greater similarity in such relational attitudes which sport leaders have in Sweden and Norway, than with Denmark. Plans of action were more popular in Sweden and Norway than Denmark. Norwegian leaders were more positive towards mainstreaming and quotas than their neighbours.

Discussion

In Denmark, there is no significant difference between the responses of both genders. Both Sweden and Norway revealed greater differences between the responses of men and women than was the case in Denmark. The women placed emphasis on relational and structural explanations, such as power relations and traditions in their explanations of gendered under-representation.

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