

Gender related boardroom dynamics:
How women make and can make contributions on corporate boards

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Paper for WIMR- This is an abbreviated and revised version of a paper presented at the
4th EURAM conference in Scotland May 2004.

Gender-related boardroom dynamics: How women make and can make contributions on corporate boards

Abstract

Research paper

- Purpose:* The objective of this article is to examine and conceptualize gender related boardroom dynamics that affect how women can make contributions on corporate boards.
- Design/methodology:* We collected stories from eight women directors about their experiences from more than one hundred corporate boards. Narrative methods were used in the data analysis.
- Findings:* We found that women as well as men need to understand the power game inside and outside the boardroom. Their contribution depends on the ability and willingness to make alliances with the most influential actors, to spend time on preparations, being present on the most important decision-making arenas, and to take leadership roles.
- Implications:* The study has implications for theory as well as practice. Process-oriented theories should be included in studies of boards and governance, and the study showed that boardroom dynamics are not neutral to gender. Concepts and relationships are suggested that should be included in further theory development. The study has also given several practical examples and suggestions on how women can make contributions on corporate boards.
- Value:* The study has value for developing the role of women directors.

Key words: Women directors, boardroom dynamics, power, alliances, preparations

The study of women directors has received increased attention since the early 1980s (Daily, Certo and Dalton, 2000). Attention has in particular been given to the extent women have been able to break through the “glass ceiling” and become members of corporate boards of directors. Considerable research has thus comprised benchmarking surveys with respect to the number or increase in number of women directors across industries, countries and so on (Burke and Mattis, 2000a; Daily, Certo and Dalton, 1999).

This article concerns gender-related boardroom dynamics. Its objective is to explore and conceptualise ways women make and may make contributions on corporate boards. Various authors have argued that women directors on corporate boards offer many contributions (Bilimoria, 1995; Segal, 1996; Bilimoria and Huse, 1997). Indeed, by being more receptive to contributions of women at the top, corporations can gain competitive advantage (Morrison, 1992; Fernandez, 1993). Women directors may also serve other corporate women as role models (Burke, 1994; Ely, 1995). The prime focus in this study is not simply the contributions women are making, but how women may make

contributions. This will have implications for developing the role of women directors. In this article we mainly focus on exploring and developing concepts.

The article is organized in four sections. In the first, the empirical study is positioned in relation to recent reviews of research on boards of directors and women directors. The second section presents the methods and the sample of the empirical study. The results are presented in the third section, and the conclusions and the implications are addressed in the final discussion section.

Research on boards and women directors

Research on boards has been dominated by a tradition in which board composition is related to corporate financial performance (Johnson, Daily and Ellstrand, 1996; Pettigrew, 1992; Zahra and Pearce, 1989), and mainstream research has been heavily influenced by a research tradition from financial economics and theories treating the board as a so-called “black box” (Daily, Dalton and Cannella, 2003; Finkelstein and Mooney, 2003).

The research is based on theoretical reflections about board role expectations, but actual board task performance is rarely measured (Gabrielsson and Huse, 2004). Even though Zahra and Pearce (1989) showed that there was a need to use middle-range theories including measures of a set of board attributes going beyond board composition, this is rarely done. Forbes and Milliken (1999) present the board as a social construction and employ cognitive theories to understand boards. They argue that boards should be understood through attributes of the board members, the board’s working style, and actual board task performance. They align attributes to boards, as with any other decision-making group, including preparation and the use of knowledge and skills, cognitive conflicts, effort norms, and cognitive conflicts. While Forbes and Milliken argue for understanding and measuring processes inside the boardroom, Pettigrew (1992) argues for considering the board as an open system, and that studies of board roles should not be separated from studies of power in institutions and society, or from studies of the composition and attributes of top management teams.

Increasing the presence of women in the boardroom may be considered as a business imperative. Daily and Dalton (2003) argue that women may add unique perspectives, experiences and work styles as compared with their male counterparts. Furthermore, adding women on corporate boards may have important signalling effects to stakeholders. Bringing women onto corporate boards should thus have positive bottom line effects. However, the representation of women corporate directors shows little variation no matter where one searches, but various efforts have been undertaken to increase the number of women on corporate boards. For example, the low representation of women directors has in Norway prompted legislation that would mandate at 40 percent women’s representation by 2005 (Daily and Dalton, 2003: 8; Fouché, 2005).

Studies of women directors are to a large degree descriptive benchmarking studies, but there are also various studies that follow the larger corporate governance literature, generally engaging in quantitative input-output studies based on archival data (Bilimoria and Pederit, 1994; Burke, 1994; Fondas and Salsalos, 1996). These studies aim at showing that corporations benefit from having women on their boards by showing

relationships between the existence or ratio of women directors and corporate financial or social performance. These studies often include women as one of several independent variables (Pearce and Zahra, 1991; Grundei and Talaulicar, 2002; Westphal and Milton, 2002). However, some recent studies, using questionnaire surveys, also explore aspects related to the contribution of women directors to the performance of board roles.

Bilimoria and Wheeler (2000) critically reviewed the extant empirical literature on women directors, and found that research has not sufficiently been such that gives the impetus for organizational change, and that will improve the representation and status of women in corporate governance. One of their conclusions was that future research on women directors should be directed at exposing the underlying dynamics of boardrooms that affect women. Bilimoria (2000) suggests that research on women directors that aims to have practical impact should go beyond agency theory and frame research on boards in a gender-specific way. There is a need for empirical research that generates coherent and forceful framing of ideas, language and insight useful for women directors in constructing their collective reality. Research should expose the hidden dynamics of boardrooms and bring light to the systemic structures that affect women and are influenced by gender relations (Bilimoria, 2000; Burke and Mattis, 2000b; Van der Walt and Ingley, 2003). Furthermore, research on boards and governance should focus on the conditions that assist directors in using their knowledge and skills (Hillman and Dalziel, 2003). We thus decided to focus this article on gender-related boardroom dynamics, and how women can make contributions on corporate boards. This includes exploration of what happens when women are entering the boardrooms (Burke and Mattis, 2000b).

Methods and sample

Through the understanding of gender-related boardroom dynamics we wanted to explore how women can make contributions on corporate boards. Burke and Mattis (2000b: 8) suggest that such information can best be obtained through in-depth interviews. We thus decided to collect board-life-stories of women directors to respond to our research question. Our data collection had several phases. Initially we interviewed twenty women directors. They were generally selected because they were highly profiled women, but some were also interviewed because they were in the private or professional network of the researchers. In these interviews, the women directors reported on their board experiences, and the interviewer and the interviewees got to know each other. With eight of these women there were follow-up interviews. The second interview was an in depth interview, most of which lasted about three hours, and were taped and transcribed. We had an open approach to the number of interviews to be conducted, but due to the rich data provided by each of the women, we decided to utilize the received material in depth rather than to increase the number of story-tellers. Three main areas were explored in the interviews: their background, their experience as director, and their advice to other women regarding being on boards. The background sequence made up about a quarter of most interviews, but is not reported on in this paper. See Bilimoria and Huse (1997) for an example of how the background sequence may be used. All interviews took place in Scandinavia, and the women directors were either Swedish or Norwegian.

(Insert Table I about here)

The characteristics of the eight women are presented in Table I. We have here given them the following names: Anne, Bente, Cathrine, Dorthe, Ellen, Frøydis, Gro and Hilde. The women were all highly profiled, and we promised to keep their identity hidden. However, Table I shows some of the diversity represented among them. They were all over forty years old, the education level was generally high, they had experiences from more than one hundred boards ranging from voluntary organizations and small partnerships to large multinational corporations.

There may be differences among countries as to the experiences of women at the top (Antal and Izraeli, 1993; Bilimoria and Huse, 1997), but the narrow sample and empirical setting was not considered to be problematic as our purpose was to explore concepts and relationships.

Data analysis and presentation

A narrative approach was used in the data analysis. Through story telling (Spickard, Landres and McGuire, 2002) the interviewees were given the opportunity to frame their own experiences. The story telling approach made it possible to explore new and relevant issues. The women interviewed were often good storytellers, and, in analyzing the data, we decided for the purpose of this paper to focus on the stories more than on quantitative text analyses. At first 339 stories and statements from the eight women were extracted and sorted into 28 specific themes. We then sorted the 28 themes in four overall themes or headings, helping us understand boardroom dynamics and how women can make contributions on corporate boards. A summary is presented in Table II.

(Insert Table II about here)

The table also shows the number of stories told by each of the eight women (A to H). This shows that there are individual differences and perceptions, but also that most themes had some general significance.

We made analyses of the subgroups based on deviations and similarities between the stories of the various women. In this article we present ten findings. The findings are indicated in Table II. We have selected as findings some of the themes that were most frequently addressed under each heading in the table. The presentation in particular focuses on the issues we have found under-represented in existing research on boards of directors and corporate governance (Daily et al., 2003).

The stories presented are the social constructions of the women. What are based on real events, and what are myths and wishful thinking in the stories, may be hard to answer. Many of the observations, even though they have not been focused in research about directorates, are appealing and sound reasonable. And even though they may not be accurate representations of reality, they still are parts of the women's perception of reality.

Results

The findings are presented according to the overall themes in Table II. Only the most frequently presented themes are included in the following presentation. Our focus was to explore concepts and relationships. We thus decided to present the findings as statements.

Power inside and outside the boardroom

One of the women told that it was a shock for her to explore the power games taking place among the male board members inside and outside the boardroom. The observations of the women regarding the male directors and the power games were sorted in six subgroups; the importance of nurturing contacts and networks; the “old boys’ network”; people of authority; prestige; power; and creating alliances. Women need to understand and relate to such areas, if they are to contribute on corporate boards.

Some of these subgroups have been commented on in the literature, for example in managerial (e.g. Mace, 1971) and class (e.g. Useem, 1984) hegemony literature, and interlocking directorates (e.g. Pennings, 1980; Richardson, 1986). The women also perceived that the motives of their male colleagues for joining a board were a matter of prestige and to be around people of power or authority (Mace, 1971; Whisler, 1989). Following the previously mentioned suggestions of Pettigrew (1992), we emphasize two aspects observed by the women directors: the importance of power and the importance of creating alliances.

Finding 1: Board decision-making may be a power game. Most of the women had stories or statements of the board as an arena for intense power games:

“... others used me in their power play. As I discovered what happened in the inner chambers, then I thought that I have been innocent too long. Yes, there is definitely a lot of power play” (Bente).

“It is a game and those not being experienced - and I feel that I have become experienced - they are getting completely manipulated. There is a lot of power in being like that. It is kind of nice to know that you master this game, but it is unnecessary that it shall be like that” (Ellen).

“It takes some time before you see the power balance in a board. Who are deciding? It is not always that the top person that decides. You need to find out who is having the wheel in their hands” (Gro).

Finding 2: Decisions are influenced through the building of alliances. The women clearly attributed power relationships to the boardroom. The women also made observations as to how and why directors form ties or alliances. Creating alliances was the theme mostly referred to by the women with respect to power and processes. Alliances are means to get power and thus tools for influencing board decisions. All the women directors, but one, made similar comments.

“You must not imagine that you can fight things through without having some allies” (Bente).

“It is important that you make alliances with the most influential and heavy board members. Not the employee directors [that are by Scandinavian corporate law elected by employees]. Board members are not all the same. You will easily get a feeling of whom the most influential board members are” (Cathrine).

“I have not made phone calls in advance, and manipulated [decisions]. However, this happens often in the board. I believe men do so more often than women. They talk before the meetings. They clarify [things] ahead [of meetings]. I have attended many board meetings where I have not been able to understand that suddenly something has been decided without having been discussed” (Gro).

The women observed that when men wanted to be influential, they made alliances. Their stories showed that some of them just accepted these alliances as a part of the game, while others clearly disliked them. While studies of boards of directors have recognized the role of alliances through interlocking directorates from inter-organisational and intra-class perspectives (Richardson, 1987), the women directors emphasized alliances as a part of the internal power mobilization among directors to achieve support in the decision-making processes.

Boards’ decision-making processes

The starting point for the women was that decision-making does not only take place within the boardroom. It takes place before the meetings, during the meetings, outside the boardroom, and after the meetings. We will here present extracts of stories about preparations, decision-making arenas and board leadership.

Finding 3: Contributions are made through preparations. Preparations for board meetings were among the issues receiving most attention from the women. They had two general comments: most men do not prepare well, and women directors should do their homework. Here are some examples.

“Many of these men did not have time to prepare properly. They had many board assignments and often many operative duties. They can attend a board meeting and read the board documents one page ahead” (Dorthe).

“One issue that I found to be a fundamental difference between women and men, was that I found the women to be much better prepared than the men It is the regulars, and they can boast that they have such a photographic reading capacity that makes them capable to go through a document in three seconds and get an impression. That is nonsense. The consequence is that they have to talk into the air - to keep the meeting running - while they read their documents, and it takes a lot more time. The advantage for these women is that they can take advantage of the men ‘while in bed’, and the men just have to try to follow” (Gro).

“I have seen that male members of this board open the envelope in the elevator. We were often joking by saying that the boardroom should be as far as possible away from the garage. The quality of the board meetings was a function of the distance between the boardroom and the garage” (Frøydis).

Preparation and involvement can be seen as indicators of commitment, and the stories of the women thus contribute to the literature about the board members' commitment. The level of commitment of many male board members is limited, and the stories told indicate that the introduction of women on corporate boards may contribute to raise the level of commitment.

Finding 4: There is unequal admission to decision-making arenas. The stories revealed that the board members did not have equal admission to all decision-making arenas. This topic is illustrated by the following citations.

“Sometimes you must be involved in particular arenas to get to understand who makes decisions. In the leadership team of the company we were as many women as men. In a meeting we were discussing a difficult issue. Then we had a break, and all the girls went to the restroom to wash hands, and while we stood there doing so, we then decided what should happen” (Gro).

“In xx board you now and then share room with other women. You see the bathroom with other women. Some common things like that, building communion between women, make it easier to make contact. You go to the swimming pool or to the sauna. It means a lot not to be alone as a woman on a board. In particular not in the breaks. During the meetings this doesn't so much matter. It is the glue around. There are some arenas where you feel you are excluded” (Frøydis).

The issue of unequal admission has not received attention in the corporate governance literature, but it fits very nicely in with some recent work on decision-making in family businesses. Nordqvist (2005) shows that the understanding of actors and arenas are crucial for family business governance. Non-family actors will often not have access to many of the important arenas where decisions are made in family businesses.

Finding 5: The chairpersons influence decisions. With respect to leadership, some of the women made some astute observations. One of the women indicated that many chairpersons are not good in utilizing the boards' resources, while another was fascinated by how the chairman manipulated the boards by formulating decisions. Here are two examples.

“I have never experienced good chairpersons. A good chairperson helps all board members into the discussion and utilizes all the resources that exist in the board. All board chairpersons I have experienced have been men” (Cathrine).

“That of letting people be able to say what's in their heart, without letting the discussion slide. He stopped the debate when it was about to get away from the topic or repeat itself, and then to draw conclusions based on his own directions. He used phrases or formulations being used by others in the debate. If I for example used the phrase - relevant problem - he would use the same phrase, but put in his own context. But still I felt that I had been heard - very astute. But he was also very raw. He was making conclusions - so that all felt that they had been heard, but later they experienced that he had used his own opinions. He had a lot of opinions himself” (Frøydis).

Board leadership is an almost neglected area in the boards and governance literature (Huse, 2005; Huse, Minichilli and Schønning, 2005). Here we have examples of the importance of board leadership, and how a board chairperson may influence board decision-making.

The women directors

The main objective of this study guided us to explore what women directors report about their contribution as board members (Bilimoria and Wheeler, 2000). When referring to their particular situation as women directors, three main aspects were observed: the existence and consequences of tokenism; attributes of women directors; and the contribution of women directors. Many statements similar to those of the women can be found in the gender and women in management literature (e.g. Kanter, 1976; Loden, 1985; Acker, 1992), and even in the discussions of the role of women directors (Burke, 1994; Segal, 1996). Here we highlight perceptions related to the signalling and resource contributions (Daily et al, 2000).

Finding 6: Signalling: Tokenism may be an advantage. The phenomenon of tokens and tokenism has received considerable attention in the women in management literature (Kanter, 1976). An interesting observation from the stories of the eight women directors was that they all had experiences from being elected as tokens. Here are some of them.

“I have been elected to some boards because they needed to have a women director. The persons they needed had first been selected, and then they had to have an alibi. They used to have one women director, and they needed to replace her” (Anne).

“Others also consider me to be a female alibi. But I feel that this was only at the start” (Ellen).

The observations from this study question the relevance of the “glass ceiling” concept for women as board members (Morrison et al., 1987). Being elected as tokens has not only negative implications. It was interesting to notice that even though all women were familiar with the glass ceiling concept, none of them referred to it as relevant. Rather the opposite. They experienced that women, at first as tokens, had a great potential in becoming a board member and getting to the top (see also Powell and Butterfield, 1994). Some of them clearly told that they would never have reached the same status or positions if the boards had not needed women as tokens. Tokenism makes it is easier for women to become board members than to become a member of a top management team. However, being selected as tokens puts great pressure on them. They met several barriers to having influence, and had to prove themselves competent in other ways than their male counterparts. Women are often getting selected as tokens, which may create problems (Acker and Houten, 1992). However, the signalling effect and representation of diversity possibly involve more advantages and challenges than problems (Morrison et al., 1987).

Finding 7: Women have many resource contributions. We will here present some of the contributions the interviewed women perceived themselves and other women directors to have. Generally, they considered women directors to have more wisdom and diligence than many male board members. Women were also able to create a good atmosphere in the boardroom, they represented diversity, soft values, women’s issues, and they were

asking questions a lot more than men. Similar lists are presented in other literature (e.g. Bilimoria and Huse, 1997; Segal, 1996). We will here thus present just a few aspects that may show some more complexity and divergence in the reasoning. The areas presented are related to the decision-making culture in the boardroom.

The women directors were very sensitive to having a good atmosphere in the boardroom.

“The company secretary told that after I came, the atmosphere changed. It was not so tough any more. Things loosened up. It became more relaxed. Some more laughter” (Dorthe).

“Many have pointed out that the tone is different with me as a woman there. And I have wondered many times whether it is because I am a woman - or whether it is because it is me. I think it is possible to have some humour. I allow myself to present comments that can make the others smile” (Ellen).

The women director showed examples of how the board members liked to see each other and looked forward to the board meetings. Forbes and Milliken (1999) refer to this as cohesiveness. A good atmosphere also facilitated openness and generosity among the board members. Another frequently mentioned attribute contributing in a similar way was about asking questions. The following comments illustrate how women directors may have a contribution by asking questions.

“I am often good in asking questions that gives the others something to reflect on. I believe that they experience it as interesting, and I am not critical. I am not asking questions to criticise. I ask to see whether there is something we need to illuminate. I am trying to include other perspectives - to get a broader discussion” (Bente).

“Women often ask questions that nobody else dare to ask. Girls dare to ask some very relevant simple questions - is it millions or billions?” (Frøydis)

Such questions may be important for developing a process-oriented boardroom culture (Daily and Dalton, 2003; Huse et al., 2005).

How men and women directors interact

The contributions by women may also be affected by gender related interactions. Men and women directors interact in various ways. The statements and stories of the eight women directors were sorted in six themes: ruling techniques; men in skirts; critical mass; women’s networks; mentors; and flirtation. Flirtation was the theme most often mentioned, but mentorship and flirtation were closely related in some of the stories.

Finding 8: Attraction may exist in the boardroom. Attraction, flirtation and chivalry were frequently mentioned by some of the women.

“I think it is an advantage to be young, not necessarily very good-looking, but attractive and be articulate, and have a sparkle in the eye” (Bente).

“I have had many advantages by being a woman. They have remembered me, and they have treated me as gentlemen would. They have wanted to help me. Everybody has remembered me because I have been the only woman. ... It may be an advantage to be a woman, but sex or gender does not mean much at the top” (Dorthe).

“I can allow myself some flirtatious behaviour that makes me acquire some knowledge of the other board members in a different way. I can see other sides of them than their male colleagues. You get knowledge about your male colleagues that they do not have about each other. Thus I may get support from them. I know a lot more about Tom as a person. I have been dancing with him. It gives another kind of insight, understanding of behaviour, that I can use if I want” (Frøydis).

The women in management literature has suggested that whenever women and men interact, whether at “work or at play, there is some level of sexuality involved. How they choose to deal with sexuality is determined by many factors” (Harriman, 1985: 113). Such concerns have not been included in the literature on board of directors. Most of the women gave warnings about getting involved in sexual relationships with other board members, and if doing so women directors should be aware of potential problems - in particular if you get involved with people with power. The observations about attraction and flirtation are in line with observations about emotions and feelings in the boardroom (Huse, 1998; Brundin and Nordqvist, 2004). However, these observations go beyond gender.

How women can make contributions

Most of the stories of the women directors are formulated to help others, and particular women, overcome barriers to make contributions on corporate boards. However, before ending the interviews we asked the women directly what advice they would give to other women. Their responses were in three categories: why become a board member, how to be recruited, and what to do when invited to become a board member? Here are some of the responses:

Finding 9: There is excitement in being a board member. The women interviewed displayed intrinsic motivations as reasons for aiming at board positions.

“Through my board assignments I have experienced having power. It is satisfactory to know that you have power. To take big and important decision. As a board member I have learnt a lot. Not only general management, but also various professions. I have learnt a lot of technology through one of the boards” (Cathrine).

“Own learning. A lot of fun. I receive a lot in return. It has been fantastic. I enjoy it. A good change from the daily duties. Other themes, other industries, other views. Learning, excitement and new people - that is what I consider to be the most important” (Gro).

Excitement was the general comment we got from the women directors. They were learning and meeting new people. They also experienced having power. They encouraged other women to get similar experiences for the sake of excitement and to make contributions as board members.

Finding 10: How to be selected - visibility is important. A major question for many was how were women to be recruited to boards. The general advice given to women was to be visible. Women aspiring to become board members must be visible on the arenas where men recruiting board members can see them. Here are some comments.

“At first you must consider yourself whether you have time and desire. Make some choices. If you want to give it priority, you then have to position yourself. Be a member of Rotary instead of studying arts. Be present on the arenas where you can develop some networks. Don’t sit at the women’s table at lunch. Take some initiatives so that you become visible. Show interest. Take initiatives. Make phone calls, talk, take contacts, and be proactive. You may ask people for lunch. Be conscious of the initiatives you take” (Frøydis).

The women clearly expressed that if you are discovered and are recognized for doing a good job on a board, your main problem is not to get invitations, but to know when to say no.

Conclusions

This study has examined gender-related boardroom dynamics, and how women can make contributions on corporate boards. Our approach was to collect “board-life-stories” from women directors, and the boards have been studied as social constructions. The study has drawn attention to the role and contribution of women directors, and to ways the status and representation of women on the top may be improved (Bilimoria and Wheeler, 2000). The extensive descriptive fieldwork has also helped to better understand, document and operationalize board variables related to the use of power and the relational dynamics in and around the boardroom (Zahra and Pearce, 1989; Pettigrew, 1992). We found that women as well as men need to understand gender-related boardroom dynamics. The contribution of women directors is not only a matter of what they can contribute with, but highly depends on their ability and willingness to make alliances with the most influential actors, to spend time on preparations, being present on the most important decision-making arenas, and to take leadership roles.

Our main findings on how women may contribute on corporate boards were summarized in ten points or statements. The women talked about advantages, challenges and problems in relation to making contributions. These contributions are often divided into resource provision and signalling roles. We have in this study found examples of various resource provision contributions (Finding 7), and we have seen that tokenism and signalling roles may be an advantage in becoming a board member (Finding 6). The women showed excitement of the power and the learning opportunities resulting from the board memberships (Finding 9). The stories of the women directors also showed that the understanding of boards as arenas for power games was an essential starting point for women wanting to have contributions on corporate boards (Finding 1). Five ways women may make contributions on corporate boards were highlighted in the stories presented in this article. These are:

- Creating alliances (Finding 2)
- Preparation and involvement (Finding 3)
- Attending the important decision-making arenas (Finding 4)

- Taking leadership roles (Finding 5)
- Being visible (Finding 10)

The importance of alliances and preparations seemed to be the most prevalent general practical observations about how women can contribute. Board members have different authority and decision-making power. The women directors reported that it is the power game at the top, which involves permanent or temporary alliances and alliance building, which is the most important element in understanding board behaviour. Several studies of directorates have included aspects of this power issue, but when implemented it is most often seen in relation to the relative power of the board and the CEO (Pearce and Zahra, 1991; Daily et al., 2003). The CEO is considered to have power if there is a majority of inside directors, and/or the CEO also is the chairperson. However, the power game at the board level is a lot more complex. There may also be various power alliances among individual board members or groups of board members. There may also be alliances between individual board members and individuals or groups outside the board. Running a board is very much a matter of being able to manage interactions and create alliances. When entering a board as a token, a woman is often not a part of the ruling alliances. She has, however, means to become a part of the power game and be influential. Some of the means are gender specific, but the starting point is to understand the boardroom dynamics in a gender perspective.

All the women gave comments on preparations for the meetings. Women were in general better prepared than men. The men's lack of preparation was by some women considered to be very arrogant, and valuable time at the board meetings was thus lost. The board members coming poorly prepared or even unprepared were often business executives with high reputation, and they had often many board assignments. The lack of preparations often also reduced the board members' independence and supported managerial dominance. By preparations and asking critical questions the women directors became less dependent of reports and presentations made by the management. Furthermore, the unsatisfactory preparations of male directors, gave the women possibilities. By doing good homework, the women got the possibility to influence decision-making and to improve their status as directors - even though they often had been elected as tokens. Although the women had less board experiences, and those in the corporate hierarchies ranked several levels lower than their male counterparts, the women directors soon proved to have great positive impact on board performance. Sometimes this started a positive virtuous circle for improving board behaviour and board effectiveness (Huse et al., 2005). The "old boys" did not want to be caught asleep, thus the women representation induced that the male directors also improved their preparations.

Discussion and Implications

We have in this article shown how women make and can make contributions on corporate boards. Women directors are expected to see or understand actual board behaviour in other ways than their male counterparts (Acker, 1992; Bilimoria and Huse, 1997), but gender lenses have only to a limited degree been included in research on boards and governance (Bilimoria and Wheeler, 2000).

We have seen the need to understand boardroom dynamics from a gender perspective. Making contributions on corporate boards go far beyond the independence and competence criteria found in most studies about boards and corporate governance.

The literature on boardroom dynamics is found in contribution about interactions and power inside and outside the boardroom (Useem, 1984; Pettigrew and McNulty, 1995; Ocasio, 1994; Huse and Eide, 1995; Zajac and Westphal, 1996; Huse, 1998; Carpenter and Westphal, 2001), norms and rules of the game (Mace, 1971; Alderfer, 1987; Whisler, 1989; Ocasio, 1999), and the board decision-making culture (Forbes and Milliken, 1999; McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999; Finkelstein and Mooney, 2003; Huse et al., 2005). The present article has contributed to increase our understanding of boardroom dynamics and to explore the above issues from a gender perspective. Through the stories we explored gender related aspects of the interactions and reactions to power and pressures (Findings 1, 2, 6 and 8), we explored how aspects of norms, leadership and rules of the game may have consequences for women becoming board members (Findings 4 and 5), and we explored how women contribute to a process-oriented decision-making culture (Findings 3 and 7). We have seen through the perceptions and social constructions of the eight women directors that boardroom dynamics are not neutral to gender. Gender influences cognition as well as behaviour.

The study has demonstrated the importance in governance research, regardless of gender, to understand and consider emotions and micro strategising processes inside and outside the boardroom (Huse, 1998; Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003; Brundin and Nordqvist, 2004; Nordqvist, 2005). Women often find it exciting to explore the power games of the board, and being a board member is considered to be a tremendous learning experience. The understanding of organisations and boards from the perspective of women directors showed how various power and manipulation techniques influence the boards' decision making. Alliances should be built, preferably with the most influential people. The women directors also clearly described how processes outside the boardroom are important in understanding boardroom dynamics. Decisions are often prepared at other arenas than the boardroom. These arenas may be formal and informal. They may be hidden or unconscious, and they may not be equally open to all board members. The traditional "sauna-story" is such an example. We have still a society where women and men do not have access to the same arenas.

The results of the study have implications both for research and practice. Our focus has been on gender perspectives, but our study also supports general efforts in exploring behavioural perspectives on boards and governance (Finkelstein and Mooney, 2003; Huse, 2005). Process-oriented theories should be included in studies of boards and governance. Efforts should be placed on developing measures and variables that can capture the dynamic power game inside and outside the boardroom. Such variables would facilitate further integration of the various intellectual traditions in research of boards of directors and people at the top (Pettigrew, 1992). In this study we have clustered observations. This clustering is important for concept development.

In this study we have had a focus on women, and the stories were collected from Scandinavian women directors. We have not collected stories from men, and we have not aimed at making inferences in relations to minorities. Future studies could benefit from the experiences from people with other backgrounds: for example, minorities, other countries, various groups of male directors (Hillman, Cannella and Harris, 2002). Such studies may help us understand what really is gender-related and not only the perceptions of women.

The study has also given several practical examples and suggestions on how women can make contributions on corporate boards. In this article we have met the call to generate knowledge and insights that can assist positive change in the representation and status of women on corporate boards (Bilimoria, 2000). Through the stories of the women directors we have gained detailed knowledge of board behaviour. We have seen that various rules of the game exist in the boardroom, and it is important to know these rules of the game. The practical contribution of this study has been to improve board behaviour and to help women and men to meet the challenges and obstacles in the power game of the boardroom. Contributions can be given by making alliances, solid preparations, being present at the most important decision-making arenas, taking leadership roles, and being visible.

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Table I Characteristics of the eight directors:

- Age:** Four women were between forty and fifty years, two women were between fifty and sixty, and two women were older than sixty years of age.
- Education:** Five of the women had graduate degrees from university - one a law degree, three in management, and one in political sciences. One of them had a Ph.D. The other women directors had their main training within their industries combined with various college exams.
- Profession:** The present profession of the women also varied, and most of them had changed not only job, but also profession through their ways to the top. Between two and four of the women had their main background from banking and financial services. Two or three of the women had considerable experiences within sports administration. Three of the women had their main employment experiences from public administration, and two from large corporations. Two of the women were now working as management consultants.
- Boards:** The largest corporations in Norway and Sweden were represented, as well as boards of small privately owned firms, universities, banks, service industries, sports, boards of state of companies, as well as boards for particular events. Even Fortune Global 500 firms are represented in the sample. Some of the women had experiences from the same boards, with the same chairpersons, and experiences even with each other.
- Family:** Four of the women were divorced, and one had never been married. Seven of the women had children, and two of them had grandchildren. The eight women directors had been raised in various parts of Scandinavia, their parents had diverse backgrounds, and most of them had siblings. The experience most of the women had in common was that their fathers had treated them as boys, and/or that their mothers wanted them to get a higher education or a professional career.

Table II Number of stories sorted on director and theme

	Sum	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
OVERALL REFLECTIONS	13	1	2	2	3	1	3	1	0
OVERALL REFLECTIONS	2			1			1		
BOARDS ARE DIFFERENT	7		2	1	1	1	2		
OTHER COUNTRIES	4	1			2			1	
POWER AND INFLUENCE	65	17	13	3	8	4	14	6	0
1. CREATING ALLIANCES (Finding 2)	21	3	5	2	2	1	4	4	
2. POWER (Finding 1)	10	2	2		1	3	1	1	
3. PEOPLE OF AUTHORITY	9	4	1		1		2	1	
4. "OLD BOYS NETWORK"	7	1	3		3				
5. PRESTIGE	7	1			1		5		
6. NURTURING CONTACTS	6	2	2	1			1		
VARIOUS	5	4					1		
BOARD DECISION MAKING	66	4	7	3	10	6	17	11	8
1. PREPARATIONS (Finding 3)	19	2	6	1	2	1	1	2	4
2. NOT EQUAL ADMITTANCE (Find. 4)	12	2	1	1			3	3	2
3. DECISIONS	11				8	1	1	1	
4. LEADERSHIP (Finding 5)	9			1			8		
VARIOUS	15					4	4	5	2
THE WOMEN DIRECTORS	96	12	8	8	9	13	21	8	17
1. RESOURCE PROVISION (Finding 7)	54	6	5	3	7	5	14	2	12
<i>a. Diversity</i>	13		1		5	2	2	1	2
<i>b. Asking questions</i>	8	2	1				1		4
<i>c. Good atmosphere</i>	7			1	1	1	3		1
<i>d. Role models</i>	6	1					4		1
<i>e. Perspective</i>	5	2	2		1				
<i>f. Wisdom and diligence</i>	5			1		2			2
<i>g. Female values</i>	5		1				3		1
<i>h. Women issues</i>	5	1		1			1	1	1
2. TOKENS-SIGNALLING (Finding 6)	22	4	3	3	2	5	3	1	1
3. WAY OF BEING	10	2				1	3	2	2
4. FAMILY AND SOCIAL LIFE	10			2		2	1	3	2
GENDER RELATED INTERACTIONS	70	7	14	8	10	6	8	11	6
1. FLIRTATION (Finding 8)	18	2	10	1	2		1	2	
2. MENTORS	15	2	2	2			2	4	3
3. RULING TECHNIQUES	14	2	2	2	2	1	2	3	
4. MEN IN SKIRTS	11	1		2	4	2		1	1
5. CRITICAL MASS	10			1	2	2	3	1	1
6. WOMEN NETWORKS	2					1			1
ADVICE TO WOMEN	29	2	0	1	6	2	11	5	2
WHY BE A BOARD MEMBER? (Find.9)	10	1		1	1	1	5	1	
HOW TO BE RECRUITED? (Finding 10)	9				1	1	3	2	2
WHAT TO DO WHEN INVITED?	10	1			4		3	2	
TOTAL NUMBER OF STORIES	339	43	44	25	46	32	74	42	33

A story or statement is placed in only group even though many stories could have been included several places.

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