

# Discursive struggles in the gendering of national team pay in Norwegian football

**Arve Hjelseth & Jorid Hovden**

Department of Sociology and Political Science,  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Author contact <arve.hjelseth@ntnu.no>

## Abstract

In 2017, the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) decided to offer the men's and the women's national teams an equal share of the revenue from the federation's sponsorship deals. This was regarded as a groundbreaking event in the history of women's football. This article examines the process that led to this result by exploring the discourses of gender justice negotiated in the process. Two parts of the process are particularly analyzed: (1) discourses prior to the formal negotiations and (2) discourses during the formal negotiations themselves. Our theoretical approach relies on critical discourse analysis, on Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher's conceptualization of forms of power in decision-making processes, and on Nancy Fraser's framework on how to achieve gender justice in organizations and society. Methodologically, interviews with representatives of core institutions in the process were conducted. Two main discourses are identified: a discourse grounded in market logic and meritocracy, applied by the NFF, and a discourse rooted in democracy and gender justice, applied by several institutional stakeholders. The main findings indicate that the decision was the result of extensive pressure from institutions applying discourses of gender justice and social recognition. From the perspective of the NFF, gender justice was not an end in itself, but rather an instrument to generate goodwill and increased sponsorship revenue. The NFF's insistence on applying the market discourse was countered by more diverse discourses. This points to a possible shift in gender politics, emphasizing democracy, gender justice, and social recognition.

*Keywords:* women's football, women and sports, gender equality in sports, critical discourse analysis, gender justice, social inclusion in sports

## Introduction

This has been a fantastic boost, and hopefully, it can impact other football nations to do the same and contribute to the further development of women's football. (Maren Mjelde, quoted in Magnussen, 2017).

The above quote stems from the captain of the Norwegian women's team in football. It highlights her surprise and satisfaction that the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) had decided to offer equal shares of the sponsorship revenue to the men's and the women's national teams. The revenues would be paid as performance bonuses, remuneration for promotional activities for sponsors, and so forth. For the sake of simplicity, we use the term *sponsorship revenue* in this article.

For the women, this meant a doubling of the previous allocation. The men's team would receive a slightly reduced amount compared to their previous deal, but their captain expressed that they were happy with the outcome, as they were highly privileged compared to the women's team (NTB, 2017). The decision generated extensive media attention, both nationally and globally. It was probably the first time in the history of football that female and male players were treated equally in financial terms. The media presented the agreement as an act of solidarity and a symbolic gesture of gender equity by the NFF (Sande, 2019).

Historically, Norway has been regarded as a leading country in terms of promoting gender equality in sport (Fasting, 1993; Hovden, 2016; Elling, Hovden and Knoppers, 2019). However, the NFF's funding of women's football had always been marginal (Hovden, 2005; Sande, 2019). For example, a survey conducted in 2017 showed that the annual income of male players who played for the Norwegian national team exceeded the income of their female counterparts by NOK 6.4 million, roughly €640,000 (Lie, 2017). The NFF argued that this was due to the gender gap in revenue from sponsors, media, and UEFA and FIFA (Lien and Johnsen, 2019). The revenues were thus used by the NFF to justify gender inequalities in political priorities, and these revenues were in turn regarded as neutral and fair (Sande, 2019). We use this "market discourse" as a point of departure, as it illustrates the main mode of discursive justification of the gender gap by the NFF.

Gender equality is an important principle in the laws of the umbrella organization of Norwegian sport, known as the NIF, as well as in Norwegian legislation more generally (Hovden, 2005; Lovdata, 2022). The NIF (n.d.) bans discrimination and unequal opportunities for men and women

in sports. Several stakeholders, including club leaders, sponsors, and the media, have frequently questioned the persistent lack of gender equality in funding, and particularly the lack of financial support for women's elite football (Hovden, 2005; Sande, 2019). The criticism intensified after Norway lost all three group games in the 2017 European Women's Championship. Until then, the women's national team had been ranked among the top ten in the world, while the men's team only occasionally had been among the top 40. Several stakeholders demanded immediate policy changes. A key sponsor wrote an op-ed piece in a major national newspaper, stating that they would consider negotiating their next sponsorship deal exclusively for women's football if the NFF did not strengthen its funding of women's football (Havnelid and Sagstuen, 2017). It was also pointed out that the NFF had no existing sponsorship agreement for the women's team and that female players received no financial compensation when they spent time promoting the NFF's sponsors. The NFF's view was that the low market value of the women's team meant that such an agreement was unsustainable (Sande, 2019). This illustrates a gender policy landscape where the NFF was subject to considerable pressure to allocate more financial support to the women's national team, as well as to women's football in general. The market discourse was challenged by stakeholders who pointed out the NFF's obligations to promote gender justice.

Only a few studies have been conducted on the gender gap in the financing of women's sport, with some criticizing the gender gap from law and human rights perspectives (e.g., Paskins, 2023; Poppellwell-Scevak, 2022). Rarer still is research highlighting the gender gap in relation to sponsorship (Lough and Greenhalgh, 2019). In a study of the Australian national league, Morgan (2019) found that sponsors were motivated by a desire to promote gender equality on a broader societal level, highlighting how corporate social responsibility and commercial benefits converge in women's football. Conversely, Koivisto (2022) researched whether sponsors felt that investing in the women's game enhanced their own value. She found that investors perceived women's football sponsorships as unprofitable because of the low profile of the women's game. Exploring some of the possible reasons for the gender disparity in sponsorships, Shaw and Amis (2001) have pointed out that the values and beliefs of decision-makers and the media representation of sport heavily influence what and who to sponsor.

Previous studies on sport policies and sport governance have pointed out the moral obligation of associations to reward men's and women's teams equally (e.g., Archer and Prange, 2019; Cepeda, 2021). The gender gap is often seen as the result of external market mechanisms, which cannot be compensated. The market value must be enhanced through more extensive media and broadcasting coverage. Greenwell, Mahony, and Andrew (2007), on the other hand, indicate that the willingness to allocate resources to women's sport depends on which "norm of exchange" the administrators employed. Those supporting distributive justice were more likely to allocate more resources to women's sport, while those referring to power as a norm of exchange were more likely to allocate more resources to men's sport. Similarly, the present article aims to add to the knowledge on how national sport organizations and stakeholders of women's football perceive and negotiate the social and commercial value of women's football, with a particular focus on the impacts of the market and gender equality discourses in this process.

The aim of this article is to identify and discuss the discursive struggles that unfolded in the process towards the groundbreaking equal share of sponsorship revenues between the men and women's national teams. How and why was this result reached? The article examines (1) the dominant discourses and the key institutional stakeholders in the decision-making process and (2) why the process resulted in an equal share. The study includes both formal and informal events. This entails exploring external pressures on the NFF from players and key sponsors, as well as the institutional actors involved in the formal decision-making.

The study is based on qualitative interviews with key institutional stakeholders. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010, 2012) is employed to identify representations of the dominant discourses in the transcribed texts. Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher's (1999) conceptualization of different forms of institutional power and Fraser's (1998, 2007) approach to how to promote gender justice in organizations will be used as analytical frameworks. The analyses will examine how discursive practices in sports governance are shaped by both formal and informal power relations and by external political pressures.

## Theoretical framework

In the first part of this section, we briefly account for discourses, discursive struggles, and some core elements underpinning critical discourse analyses, or CDA. When analyzing discourses, additional theory is needed to make sense of data (Fairclough, 2010, 2012). In the second part, we therefore introduce Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher's (2010) conceptualization of different forms of discursive power, as well as Fraser's (1998, 2013) analysis on how to promote gender justice in organizations.

### *Discourses and critical discourse analysis*

Discourses are collective frameworks of how to understand and represent phenomena (e.g., Fairclough, 2010; Johannessen et al., 2018). A discourse is recognized as such when certain representations are repeated over time by a large proportion of significant subject positions (Foucault, 1970). Representations are, however, never neutral. They are inherently political, normative and reflective of certain assumptions (Johannessen et al., 2018). Thus, discourses play a significant role in constructing what comes to be understood as true or valid. Individuals draw upon or adapt to existing discourses, or create counter-discourses, to provide meaning to their experiences, interests, and values. Dominant discourses often reflect contexts of unequal power relations.

Several discourses can, however, be expressed within the same representation, reflecting what can be said or not said in a specific context. A discursive struggle occurs when an alternative discourse attempts to achieve dominance by challenging the hegemonic discourse. To challenge hegemonic discourses is, however, difficult and often unpleasant. When a certain discourse achieves hegemony, it means that other discourses are ignored and/or disregarded (Johannessen et al., 2018). Alternative discourses can be established and discursive struggles arise when individuals are willing to create alternative knowledge (Shaw and Slack, 2002). In the NFF case, this may mean that it was gradually acknowledged that the financial gender gap was no longer politically tenable.

CDA (Fairclough, 2010, 2012; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) focuses on the power of discourses and the discursive practices that aim to either reinforce or challenge the status quo, or both. In this study, we explore how discourses and discursive practices of gender equality in sport policy are expressed and negotiated. We examine them “as relations between

discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth” (Fairclough, 2012, p. 9). As discourses are transdisciplinary (Fairclough, 2012), scholars should draw on theories and concepts from multiple disciplines to make sense of them. Hence, by examining discourses related to gender equality in football, we draw on concepts developed in political science and feminist theory.

### *Power, gender, and production of knowledge in decision-making processes*

Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher (1999) provide a useful conceptualization of power that may explain how decision-making bodies in elite football produce knowledge. As discussed in the following, five forms of power are employed in relation to institutional discourses: positional power, agenda-setting power, hidden power, power of dialogue, and power of conflict.

First, *positional power* may be exercised through one’s position, status, job, or title (Rao et al., 1999). It may reside in any position and is thus not restricted to leadership. In our study, we examine how different institutional stakeholders promoting women’s football used their positional power to influence the NFF’s decisions.

*Agenda-setting power* is the capacity to establish boundaries of acceptance. It is often exercised through priorities set out in organizational policies (Rao et al., 1999). Female leaders are underrepresented in most decision-making processes in Norwegian sports federations, including the NFF (Fasting and Sisjord, 2019). They may struggle to influence the directions and priorities of the NFF’s policies in order to safeguard their political interests.

*Hidden power* refers to situations where “power is exerted to ensure that certain ideas are accepted as normal, and therefore people don’t question them” (Rao et al., 1999, p. 7). Such power aims to make dominant discourses accepted as common sense. We examine whether or not the dominant discursive practices in the decision-making process were represented as common sense, for example whether the market was seen as the “natural” way to allocate resources. Feminist studies of sport organizations (Hovden, 2001; Knoppers, Spaaij, and Claringbould, 2021; Velija et al., 2014) have shown that when women are ascribed a secondary status, they often accept or comply to the taken-for-granted view.

The *power of dialogue* recognizes to what extent those involved in discussions are heard, can influence the issues discussed, and offer counter-

arguments (Fletcher, 2001; Rao et al., 1999). In this study, we explore the discursive spaces open to dialogue in the decision-making process and the potentials for alternative perspectives to be shared and heard.

Finally, the *power of conflict* refers to how individuals can press for change by articulating alternative discourses. Several studies (Fielding-Lloyd and Mean, 2016; Hovden, 2013; Knoppers et al., 2022) have shown how women have used discursive practices to change how they are viewed in sport policy and coaching. Such practices include sharing positive experiences and questioning the masculine culture in sport organizations. They have thus employed discourses that have in turn questioned dominant discourses. Registering and questioning dominant discourses and analyzing the power of conflict is an essential part this article.

### *Gender equality and gender justice*

To identify the various representations of gendering and gender equality in discourses, we lean on aspects of Fraser's (1998, 2007, 2013) framework on how to promote gender justice in organizations and society. Her framework represents a democratic alternative to neo-liberal and meritocratic thinking on justice and gender equality. Arguing that all groups, independent of background, gender, race, and so forth, should be able to participate in social activities on equal terms, she identifies three crucial conditions to achieve gender-equal institutions: 1) economic redistribution of resources, 2) democratization (e.g., equal representation of women and men in organizational decision-making), and 3) social recognition on equal terms.

First, economic redistribution is characterized as a decisive condition for justice. Societal groups excluded from income-generating activities are often denied satisfying standards of living (Fraser, 2007). If women's football is poorly funded, that implies unequal opportunities to develop as players and provokes feelings of discrimination and marginalization (Skogvang, 2006). If gender justice is assessed within a market discourse, it will only reproduce gender injustice.

Fraser's second prerequisite concerns democratization. This entails that all groups should have an equal opportunity to be represented and heard in organizational decision-making, independent of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and other factors (Fraser, 1998). In our study, we examine whether and to which extent female national team players were discursively represented in the decision-making process.

Turning to the third prerequisite, Fraser (1998) emphasizes that all societal groups should be recognized equally. Injustice of recognition often refers to differentiations rooted in the status order of society and organizations (Fraser, 2007). Regarding gender, she points out how institutional attitudes, behaviors, and practices associated with masculinity are more valued than those associated with femininity. Such cultural dominance is a major threat to a gender-just society. When some groups have the discursive power to define and rank other groups and cultures, these other groups are neglected, invalidated, and stigmatized. Socially and culturally misrecognized groups are thus referred to in stereotypical and condescending ways (Fraser, 2007). Studies have shown how dominant discourses on women's football in Norway are shaped by stereotyping and trivialization (Hjelseth and Hovden, 2014; Lippe, 2010). In this study, we will identify if and how the misrecognition of women's football and the Norwegian national team is discursively represented.

Fraser (2013) also discusses how economic resources and social recognition may intersect and discursively reinforce each other. Each organization/institution has its specific culture and dominant norms, often linked to financial dimensions. Institutional patterns of cultural values thus deprive some groups of the status as full partners in social interactions, resulting in misrecognition. Former studies of women's football in Norway indicate a discursive gender order that legitimates economic marginalization and lack of recognition (Hovden, 2005; Hjelseth and Hovden, 2014; Skogvang, 2006). We thus examine how the relationship between social recognition and economic redistribution was discursively framed in the decision-making process.

Based on this framework, our aim is to identify the dominant representations and discourses of gender equality that were at play when the gender-equal sponsorship agreement was reached in 2017. We examine the knowledge, power relations, and understandings of gender and football that were at play. Further, we also analyze how the dominant discourses were challenged and resisted through counter-discourses. While several studies on how women's elite football in different ways are marginalized compared to men's (Hjelseth and Hovden, 2014; Parry, Clarkson, and Rowe, 2021; Peeters and Elling, 2015), few have addressed the gendered processes in the distribution of financial resources in federations.

## Methodology: Critical discourse analyses of interview texts

### *Critical discourse analysis as methodology*

CDA is used to identify discourses in texts. According to Jørgensen and Phillips (1999), extensive knowledge of the context is required to identify and analyze discourses. Human action takes place in negotiations, where involved subjects assign and acquire different roles or subject positions, based on the discursive understandings they are part of. Thus, the context limits the subjects' opportunities for social participation and influence.

Discourse analyses aim to identify representations actualized in social practices (Johannessen et al., 2018). Representations refer to the underlying discourses, which in turn reflect the power to define conditions, issues, and events, but also resistance and alternative understandings of a problem (Fairclough, 2010; Foucault, 1983). In this study, we have been guided by an intent to explore the relationship between gender and power – for example, how powerful actors within the NFF sought to justify the organizational gender gap in sponsorship revenue.

### *Interview data as text source*

We used in-depth interviews with institutional stakeholders to collect data. By adopting a so-called maximum variation sampling strategy (Markula and Silk, 2011), we recruited and interviewed seven informants who represented the key institutions involved, namely, the respective spokespersons of the national teams, the leader of the NFF's marketing department, the leader of the association of Norwegian elite-level football clubs for women (*Toppfotball Kvinner*, the TFK), two of the main sponsors of the NFF, and the leader of the Norwegian Athlete Association (NISO). The informants were recruited by an email that explained the project and included a statement of consent.

After sampling, we constructed an interview guide with a few main topics. These focused on components that were seen as crucial to identify discursive representations, such as problem definitions, central positional objectives, and views on decision-making processes, gender equality, and the NFF's distribution of resources. The interview guide was adapted to the institutional position of each interviewee. Beforehand, the interviewees were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and guar-

anteed confidentiality. The interviews were conducted face to face, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Since the interviewees were representing their institutions, we have chosen to refer to their institutional affiliation and not to their individual characteristics, except for their gender. The quotes have been translated to English by the authors.

## Analysis: discourses and discursive struggles in the process

The analysis examines how discursive struggles between different stakeholders directly and indirectly influenced the final outcome of the NFF's gender-equal sponsorship deal in 2017. The first part highlights the representations and underlying discourses by different stakeholders *prior* to the formal decision-making, while the second part presents the representations and discursive practices in the formal decision-making process, as well as the justifications and reactions to the final outcome.

### *Representations and discursive struggles prior to the formal decision-making*

As mentioned, the discursive struggles regarding the underfunding of the women's team were sparked by the failure of the women's national team at the European Women's Championship in 2017, when they lost every game after having finished runner's up in 2013. The media and several stakeholders of women's football, including sponsors, the TFK, and the national team players themselves, highlighted the lack of financial support from the NFF (Sande, 2019). The players had repeatedly pointed out the glaring gender inequalities in funding. Regarding the consequences of the lack of a formal sponsorship agreement, one of the interviewees from the women's team said:

I take two hours off work when I do a session for [an NFF sponsor], and I pay for parking with my own money. I spend two hours down there, and then I return to work. When someone from the men's national team arrives, he gets NOK 15,000 just for showing up. It feels so unfair – it cost me NOK 2,500 to do the same job.

The female players complained about this issue for years, but reported that the NFF had responded “with deaf ears and ignorance”. The players did not feel fully recognized as elite athletes, even as the NFF expected them to perform at an elite European level. The lack of recognition was experienced as an accepted attitude within the NFF’s male-dominated leadership. In meetings, the representative of the women’s team said she felt like a beggar:

We belong to an organization that has a lot of money – and we know that we’re talking to people with a very high income. Still, I must somehow justify why I should get a thousand kroner (...). We know that the men’s team allocates and earns a lot more money than us, but that isn’t a legitimate reason for not treating us fairly. (...) We don’t expect to have the same income as the male players, but we expect to be respected and given the same opportunities to develop as players.

These representations indicate that the female players felt excluded from income-generating activities (Fraser, 2007). The lack of opportunities to develop as players obviously provoked feelings of discrimination and marginalization (Pfister, 2010). Their experiences reflect their lack of positional power to negotiate on equal terms when addressing their conditions, interests, and institutional realities (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Rao et al., 1999). Further, these representations indicate a hegemonic discourse within the NFF, where the inferior commercial value of women’s football results in less recognition and prestige (Fraser, 2013). When they pointed out the gender discrimination and gender inequalities in funding, they were ignored by the NFF. The NFF’s attitude was that in order to be heard, players had to adapt to the dominant market discourse and focus on the market value of their sporting achievements. The player we interviewed put it this way:

We are careful not to use it [i.e., inequality] as an argument. (...) We try to promote our product. I think we have been subjected to a lot of criticism because we’ve complained and whined all the time (...). In the group, we’ve become conscious about trying not to complain (...).

You should be allowed to demand change, even though it won’t necessarily create a higher market value instantly (...). At times you need to put a value on something to make it attractive. If we are still expected to be a top European nation, it is necessary to spend more money on us (...). It’s like setting up a new business. In the beginning you might operate at a loss, but hopefully, it will pay off in the long run.

The player's account indicates that the democratic discourse, emphasizing fairness and gender equality, was rejected and neglected by the NFF. Faced with accusations of self-pity when they addressed the gender inequality, the female players ultimately complied by following the dominant market discourse. This shows how the NFF's political leadership promoted their agenda-setting power to ensure their capacity to establish boundaries of acceptance, by presenting the market discourse as common sense (Rao et al., 1999). The pressure for change, through the articulation of democratic counter-discourses, thus seemed futile. When women's status in an organization is secondary, they often have to comply with the taken-for-granted views (Hovden, 2001; Knoppers et al., 2021; Velija et al., 2014). The NFF interviewee, who was a key actor in the process, confirmed the dominance of the market discourse:

There are some market mechanisms that you cannot compensate for. Men's football has a different market value than women's football – a different price level. (...) The market forces in men's football are enormous. (...) It takes a long time to level out these gaps (...). We can't compensate for a 'market giant' of this size. So, to be frank, the federation's view is that there are mostly expenses with the women – they are not seen as something to invest in.

This representation of the case shows how the dominant market discourse shaped and directed gender policy in elite-level football. To the NFF, gender equality and democracy could not justify increasing the funding of women's elite football, given that it was the men's team that was generating the vast majority of the income. The NFF's gendering of financial resources was rooted in neo-liberal and meritocratic discourses that most often result in gender injustice (Fraser, 2007; Hovden, 2005).

The TFK, the association of women's elite-level football clubs in Norway, turned out to be an influential stakeholder in the process leading up to the formal negotiations on the 2017 sponsorship agreement. The TFK was aware of the national team's financial situation. As the umbrella organization for the elite clubs, they initiated negotiations with the NFF regarding sponsorship deals for the clubs, even though they knew that the NFF considered it to be a waste of time and effort. The head of the TFK therefore asked for permission to sell the marketing rights for the women's elite league independently of the NFF. The TFK's female leader described the events this way:

We started early in the spring. Our board decided that we should ask the NFF if we were allowed to sell the sponsorship deals ourselves and keep the income and take hold of the rights. (...) It is a huge responsibility, but still, what was there to lose? We approached the NFF's top leaders and said: This is what a commercial manager of yours says – what do you intend to do? They never answered in public, but they soon understood that they had to allow us. They either had to act themselves or allow us to own the rights.

The interviewee underlined that one of the main reasons for this initiative was previous experiences that “without external pressures on such an organization [i.e., the NFF], nothing ever happens”.

The interviewee also stated that the TFK had worked strategically for years to direct attention to the unfair treatment of women's football, and especially to provide them with a fair share of the sponsorship revenue. She was convinced that the NFF, just as many other football federations had done, would have to invest a good deal more in women's elite football if they wanted to improve their achievements, recognition, and status.

The TFK's account shows how both the market discourse and the discourses of democratization and gender justice were used in the discursive struggle for more resources. Like the player on the women's national team, the female head of the TFK had experienced that the NFF largely ignored democratic discourses anchored in organizational values such as democracy and gender equality. Such experiences may demonstrate how the NFF's male-dominated leadership possessed the positional power to define institutional realities (Rao et al., 1999). On the other hand, the TFK's initiative to establish a sponsorship deal for women's elite football indicates that they possessed the power of dialogue. The NFF clearly accepted them as a dialogue partner when discussing issues related to women's football, thus enabling the TFK to convey counterarguments and help bring about change (Rao et al., 1999).

Prior to the formal decision-making, some of the NFF's main sponsors voiced similar viewpoints. Using discourses of gender equality, they criticized the NFF's reliance on the market discourse to justify the gender gap. During our interviews, one of these sponsors recalled making it clear that if the NFF did not help reduce the financial gender gap, they would instead have “looked for an opportunity to make a four-year deal for women's football exclusively”. Another sponsor also approached the NFF, suggesting a new deal to strengthen the economy of the women's elite-level clubs. The aim was to enable the best female players to turn fully professional.

This initiative ended in the agreement described above, after the TFK had gained the rights to negotiate a deal for the women's clubs. The NFF responded negatively to the potential sponsor, but the sponsor still decided to push the idea forward. Accordingly, an agreement was made with the TFK. Our interviewee from the latter organization described it as "the easiest deal I've ever made. Two meetings and then we signed a historical agreement."

Such accounts and discursive struggles were illustrative of the discursive practices leading up to the negotiations. The struggles leaned on two dominant but contradictory discourses: a meritocratic market discourse and a democratic gender equality discourse. Interestingly, two of the NFF's main sponsors, representing the market forces, did not apply the market discourse when arguing for improving the financial conditions of women's elite football. They mainly employed discourses emphasizing higher social recognition and more gender justice (Fraser, 2007). In line with Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher (1999), the discursive struggles also demonstrate how stakeholders such as the TFK and the sponsors were exercising forms of both dialogical power and power of conflict, enabling them to question and counter the NFF's dominant discursive practices.

### *Representations, discursive struggles, and reactions during the formal decision-making*

The sponsorship agreement was formally negotiated by representatives from the NFF, the Norwegian Athlete Association (NISO), and the men's national team. NISO's role was to represent the players' arguments and interests, and they wanted to address the need for a specific sponsorship agreement for the women's national team, as well as the strong dissatisfaction among the female players about the NFF's lack of financial support. The NISO interviewee noted that in the negotiations, the NFF accepted that this should change because of the increasing recognition of women's football in Europe, and added:

Nationally and not at least internationally, the large clubs put a lot of resources into women's football. They don't do it to be kind, they see the potentials. (...) I think that the NFF must start recognizing how popular some of our most profiled players are.

This representation suggests how social recognition and market value are intertwined, and discursively may reinforce each other (Fraser, 2007). NI-

SO's main message was that the NFF should acknowledge the increasing sporting and cultural value of women's elite football and recognize the market potential. They therefore proposed creating a decent sponsorship deal for the women's national team and allowing them a fair share of the sponsorship revenue. To the surprise of both NISO and other stakeholders, the NFF went even further and proposed that these revenues should be shared equally between the men's and the women's team. As NISO's representative recalled:

At the final meeting, it was the NFF that suggested an equal share. We had expected a considerable improvement for women's football – paying them for what they do – but it was the NFF who suggested sharing the revenue equally.

We asked the NFF interviewee why they, contrary to their previous discursive practices, had proposed this solution. Even though the decision seems to have been influenced by extensive pressure from external stakeholders, in particular the primary sponsors, the NFF interviewee claimed that the decision was based on their own assessments:

We agreed that we should try to secure a sponsorship agreement for the women, too. The girls have helped market things (...), but previously it was never supposed to yield them any financial return – in fact, they were happy just to help make their sport visible. (...) We had a look at all the payments we had to the boys and the girls, to get an overview of the larger picture. We had previously spent six and a half million kroner on the boys and three and a half million on the girls. Well, that's a huge difference – we were surprised at the size of the difference. (...) But on the other hand, it's not so huge that nothing can be done about it. And then the idea appeared, at least to me – if the boys would accept a modest reduction of their income from the sponsorship deal, it would reduce the gap, and we could put that money into the deal for the girls. Still, we were a bit short, but if the boys agreed to this, everyone would be happy (...). It would look strange not to put in the remaining amount, to make it equal.

According to the NFF interviewee, the delegate from the men's team fully accepted their proposal. He also admitted that Norway's poor showing at the Women's European Championship in 2017, and the need to improve the team's results, had influenced the final decision: "We must make sure that our best players, about 30 players, can be more professional. We have not been able to do that, so we had to do something to ensure better sporting results."

The above representations seem to reflect several discursive practices. NISO's arguments for redistribution were mainly based on discourses of the economic impacts of social recognition rather than on democratic discourses of gender equality. In line with the representative from the women's national team, NISO had experienced that the NFF often resisted and ignored gender equality discourses. Accordingly, it is worth noting that the interviewee from the NFF did not defend the equal share agreement by pointing to their organizational mandate to promote gender equality and democracy in football, quite the contrary:

We put in an additional two million kroner from the NFF, but that was not primarily an issue of gender equality, even if that is a very good thing and fair (...). But we're not the Gender Equality Federation, we're the Football Federation. Our job is to make sure that results can improve.

This quote illustrates that gender equality was not an aim in itself. It rather turned out to be a kind of positive, unintended consequence. In some ways this discursive fact points to an institutional paradox, as the NFF has an overall organizational mandate to promote equal treatment of all members, regardless of gender. This case demonstrates how this mandate is neither taken seriously nor given priority in the NFF's discursive practices. Rather, meritocratic market discourses were used and fully accepted to justify the financial gender discrimination. It is also worth noting that the representative of the women's national team was not included in the formal decision-making, and that the women's team was informed about the outcome after the deal was made. According to Fraser (1998), equal representation of men and women in decision-making bodies is a prerequisite for achieving gender justice in organizations. The women's representative expressed that she was equal parts surprised, satisfied, and relieved when the result was made public. She interpreted the final decision as the result of outside pressure and the NFF's urgent need to restore the goodwill of the media, the sponsors, and other main stakeholders of women's football:

I know the NFF and the trouble they're in. I feel that this was a nice time for them to create some positive goodwill. The cost was not that high really, for improving their bad reputation.

The interviewee from the NFF partly confirmed this explanation:

We wrote a press release that same evening. (...) We wanted to demonstrate that we can face the media and show that we don't run after ev-

erybody else. (...) Norway is known for being a leader in terms of gender equality.

Such representations suggest that the final agreement was largely based on the NFF's need to restore their public standing by fulfilling external demands to strengthen the financial support to women's football. But does the decision represent a sufficient basis to pave the way for narrowing the financial gender gap in Norwegian football? We will reflect on this issue in the concluding section.

## Concluding discussion

The analysis showed how different institutional stakeholders and the NFF, depending on their positional power, applied different discourses in the process that led up to the final sponsorship agreement in 2017. Here, we discuss some of the discursive struggles and alliances that formed the process and reflect on whether the outcome of this agreement may foster a future change in the NFF's gender policies.

The discursive struggles regarding the gendered distribution of the NFF's sponsorship revenue uncovered that two dominant and conflicting discourses were applied in the process: the meritocratic market discourse and the democratic gender equality discourse. Our analysis indicates that the NFF's market discourse was hegemonic, as the federation was positioned to wield both agenda-setting power and hidden power (Rao et al., 1999). For example, the power of the discursive hegemony was revealed by how the institutional stakeholders directly and indirectly adapted to the NFF's market discourse. The women's national team, the FTK umbrella organization for elite-level clubs, and the football federation's main sponsors all used market-based arguments when requesting more financial support for women's football, even when they expressed that the existing gender injustice in funding was unacceptable and could not be solved solely through market logic. It is hard to assess whether this discursive practice was mostly strategic, since these actors had previously experienced that arguments promoting gender equality were mostly met by "deaf ears". This may also explain why they often applied the recognition discourse – that is, the third precondition for gender equality identified by Fraser (1998, 2007, 2013) – as a sub-discourse to justify their claim for more gender parity, with their argument being that the increasing recognition of women's

elite football in Europe had fostered higher market value. In other words, they justified their wish for more gender equality by pointing to how social recognition is linked to the redistribution of economic resources (Fraser, 2007). Such discursive characteristics seem, however, to highlight the NFF's positional power. The NFF seems to have had the power to define the accounts and discourses that were either deemed relevant or neglected and marginalized (Rao et al., 1999).

The NFF's power to define the output was also illustrated by how the female players were not included in the final decision-making that led to the new gender-equal sponsorship deal. The interviewee from the NFF underlined that several of the male national team players were contacted and seen as vital discussants of the final proposal. Even though the women's team would be strongly affected by the new deal, their opinions were clearly regarded as less relevant. It is surprising that this can still happen in a democratic sport organization such as the NFF. It is the largest sport organization in Norway, where gender parity and equal gender representation are legislated as core values (NIF, n.d.). Such decision-making practices indicate how hidden forms of hegemonic power relations work (Rao et al., 1999) and how male-dominated decision-making often results in an undemocratic power play shaped by gender discrimination (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2008; Hovden, 2001; Sogn, 2023).

The process also revealed a discursive struggle regarding who was responsible for providing women's football with the financial muscle needed to become more professional. The NFF previously referred to the women's team as an expense item, and their funding reflected their lack of market value. Influential actors, such as the women's national team players, the TFK, NISO, and not least the NFF's main sponsors, argued differently. They pointed to the NFF as being responsible for providing the national teams and the top players with sufficient resources to fulfill their sporting ambitions. Thus, they defined the responsibility of allocating sufficient financial resources and promoting gender equality as an *organizational* problem at the NFF, and not as a problem to be solved by external market forces or stakeholders. This discursive struggle seems to characterize all parts of the process, and as discussed above, it turned out to be decisive for the NFF's final proposal.

In the long run, the NFF will probably find it hard to legitimize discursive practices that have little or no support among most of its members, and particularly not among influential stakeholders both inside and outside of the federation. This seems to have been the case in this process.

As analyzed above, several of the interviewees suggest that the external institutional pressure from different advocates of women's football contributed to initiate the NFF's novel sponsorship deal. It was obvious that external pressures, particularly from the main sponsors, contributed in making the NFF acknowledge their organizational responsibility to provide women's elite football with sufficient economic resources to promote more gender-equal opportunities (Fraser, 2007). This was seen as both necessary and fair, and it would further contribute to increased recognition and status of women's football.

Nonetheless, the NFF did not justify the final decision by referring to their democratic mandate to promote gender-equal opportunities. Their main justification was instead that the deal would provide the women's team with better conditions to improve sporting results. Accordingly, the NFF's male-dominated leadership still resisted paying political attention to their organizational and societal responsibility to promote gender equality in their field, something that is not uncommon in the world of sports (see, e.g., Elling et al., 2018; Hovden, 2001; Sogn, 2023). Such leaders may advocate gender equality as a basic democratic principle, but they rarely initiate gender issues in policy-making and often meet women's initiatives with silence and/or neglect (Hovden, 2001).

Thus, a crucial question examined in this study is whether the outcome of the 2017 sponsorship agreement may herald a change in the NFF's gender policy, leading to more equal funding and increased recognition of women's elite football. According to Poppelwell-Scevak (2022), positive steps towards increased gender equality in organizations must be embedded in the everyday practices of the governing bodies in order to bring about sustainable changes. In our study, the discursive practices indicate that the NFF initially hesitated to take significant steps to promote gender equality. Conversely, and in line with previous research (Lough and Greenhalgh, 2019; Morgan, 2019), NFF's primary sponsors regarded women's sport as an important arena to support core societal values such as gender justice in order to strengthen the goodwill of their brands, leading them to pressure the NFF to initiate changes in this area. However, the NFF only acted upon their moral obligation to promote gender equality (Archer and Prange, 2019) when they felt it was needed in order to restore public goodwill following a disastrous performance at the 2017 European Championships. The results are similar to those found in a study by Greenwell, Mahony, and Andrew (2007), which showed that stakeholders who agreed

to distributive justice as a resource allocation norm were likely to allocate more monetary resources to women's sports.

As indicated by our findings, the NFF viewed gender parity in sponsorship revenues not as a political priority but rather as a positive byproduct of the new agreement, one that would generate political goodwill in a country where gender equality was a key political aim. This suggests that Norway's self-image as one of the world's most gender-equal societies was used rhetorically by the NFF. On the other hand, the interviewees representing the main sponsors, the TFK, and the women's national team pointed to the intrinsic value of gender equality and how the ambitions, efforts, and personal investments of female players deserve to be taken seriously. Their comments reflected a revised gender policy, based on discourses of equal valuation and respect regardless of gender (Fraser, 2013; Holst, 2010). Since the agreement in 2017, the equal share policy of the sponsorship revenues has been prolonged. In this sense, the agreement has led to a change in the NFF's gender policy. The discursive practices regarding economic allocations to women's elite football can no longer only be sustained solely on meritocratic market discourses. Thus, the discursive struggle in this study seems to have contributed to a strengthened focus on democratic discourses of gender justice, something that may then facilitate re-distributive policies in favor of women's elite football.

As indicated, more research is needed on the discursive practices in sport organizations when they make decisions. It is important to acquire further knowledge on why the gender gap arises and seems difficult to change. We therefore need future studies that focus on the gendering of the distribution of economic resources in sport policy and governance. Such studies should take a closer look at the relationships and power relations among sponsors, the media, and governing bodies, and identify the dominant discourses that are unfolded in organizational decision-making. It would, for example, be interesting to explore how the increasing commercialization of elite sport affects how willing democratic sport organizations are to promote gender justice in funding, as well as the role of sponsors and sport administrators in this regard. Another important aspect to study is how gender representation in decision-making influences women's fight for having their fair share of financial resources in sport organizations.

## Reference list

- Archer, A. and Prange, M. (2019) "Equal play, equal pay": Moral grounds for equal pay in football. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 46(3), 416–436.
- Cepeda, I. (2021) Wage inequality of women in professional tennis of the leading international tournaments: Gender equality vs market discrimination? *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 407–426.
- Claringbould, I. (2019) *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2012) Critical discourse analysis. In J. P. Gee and M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 9–20.
- Fairclough, N. and Wodak, R. (1997) Critical discourse analysis. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction*. London: SAGE, pp. 248–284.
- Fasting, K. (1993) Female leaders in the Norwegian Confederation of Sports. In P. Giess-Stüber and I. Hartmann-Tews (Eds.), *Frauen und Sport in Europa*. Sankt Augustin: Academica-Verlag, pp. 48–57.
- Fasting, K and Sisjord, M. K. (2019) Norway: Gender, governance and the impact of quota regulations. In A. Elling, J. Hovden, and A. Knoppers (Eds.), *Gender Diversity in European Sport Governance*. London: Routledge, pp. 28–131.
- Fielding-Lloyd, B. and Mean, L. (2016) Women training to coach a men's sport: Management gendered identities and masculinist discourses. *Communication & Sport*, 4(4), 401–423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479515588720>
- Fletcher, J. K. (2001) *Disappearing acts: Gender, pnd Knoppers, A. (2008) Doing and undoing gender in sport governance. Sex Roles*, 58, 81–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9351-9>
- Elling, A., Hovden, J. and Knoppers, A. (Eds., 2019) *Gender diversity in European sport governance*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2010) *ower, and relational practice at work*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1970) *The order of things: An archeology of the human sciences*. New York: Vintage/Random House.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The archeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1983) Afterword. The subject and power. In H. Dreyfus and P. Rainbow (eds.), *Michel Foucault. Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 208–226.
- Fraser, N. (1998) *Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, participation*. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Abteilung Organisation und Beschäftigung.
- Fraser, N. (2007) Feminist politics in the age of recognition: A two-dimensional approach to gender justice. *Studies in Social Justice*, 1(1), 23–35.
- Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neo-liberal crisis*. New York: Verso.

- Greenwell, T. C., Mahony, D. F., and Andrew, P. S. (2007) An examination of marketing resource allocation in NCAA Division I athletics. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 16(2), 82–92.
- Havnelid, Å. and Sagstuen, T. (2017) Dette kan ikke Norges største idrett være bekjent av. *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/829kA/dette-kan-ikke-norges-stoerste-idrett-vaere-bekjent-av-havnelid-og-sags>. Published August 29, 2017 (accessed November 11 2023).
- Hjelseth, A. and Hovden, J. (2014) Negotiating the status of women's football in Norway: An analysis of online supporter discourses. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 11(3), 253–277.
- Holst, C. (2010) Nancy Fraser: Kritisk teori uten filosofi? In J. Pedersen (Ed.), *Moderne politisk teori*. Oslo: Pax Forlag, pp. 165–184.
- Hovden, J. (2001) *Makt, motstand og ambivalens: Betydninger av kjønn i idretten*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Tromsø.
- Hovden, J. (2005) Fra likestilling – til nytte og nytelse? Kjønnskonstruksjoner og markedsstyring i idretten. *Sociologisk Forskning*, (1/2005), 19–27.
- Hovden, J. (2013) Women as agents of change in male dominated sports cultures. In G. Pfister and M. K. Sisjord (Eds.), *Gender and Sport, Changes and Challenges*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, pp. 33–49.
- Hovden, J. (2016): The “fast track” as a future strategy for achieving gender equality and democracy in sport organizations. In Y. Auweele, E. Cook, and J. Parry (Eds.), *Ethics and governance in sport: The future of sport imagined*. New York: Routledge, pp. 35–43.
- Johannessen, L. E., Rafoss, T. W. and Rasmussen, E. B. (2018) *Hvordan bruke teori? Nyttige verktøy i kvalitativ analyse*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Jørgensen, M. W. and Phillips, L. (1999) *Diskursanalyse som teori og metode*. København: Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.
- Knoppers, A., Spaaij, R., and Claringbould, I. (2021) Discursive resistance to gender diversity in sport governance: Sport as a unique field? *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(3), 517–529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2021.1915848>
- Knoppers, A., de Haan, D., Norman, L., and LaVoi, N. (2022) Elite women coaches negotiating and resisting power in football. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(3), 880–896. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12790>
- Koivisto, E. (2022) *The impact of women's football sponsorship announcement on the stock price of the sponsoring company*. Master thesis, Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki. <http://hdl.handle.net/10227/486151>
- Lie, S. L. (2017) Enorme kjønnsforskjeller i toppidretten: Norske menn tjente 100 millioner mer enn norske kvinner. *NRK*. [https://www.nrk.no/sport/enorme-kjoennsforskjeller-i-toppidretten\\_-norske-menn-tjente-100-millioner-mer-enn-norske-kvinner-1.13806390](https://www.nrk.no/sport/enorme-kjoennsforskjeller-i-toppidretten_-norske-menn-tjente-100-millioner-mer-enn-norske-kvinner-1.13806390). Published December 10, 2017 (accessed October 27, 2021).
- Lien, M. and Johnsen, L. (2019) Fallet. *Josimar*, (4/2019).
- Lippe, G. v. d. (2010) *Et kritisk blick på sportsjournalistikk: Medier og idrett i en globalisert verden*. Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget.

- Lough, N. and Greenhalgh, G. (2019) Sponsorship of women's sport. In N. Lough and A. N. Geurin (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the Business of Women's Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Lovdata (2022) *Act relating to equality and a prohibition against discrimination (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act)*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2017-06-16-51> (accessed March 17, 2024)
- Magnussen, J. (2017) Landslagskvinnenes likestillingsseier brukes for alt den er verdt av andre. VG. <https://www.vg.no/sport/fotball/i/8bj32/landslagskvinnenes-likestillingsseier-brukes-for-alt-den-er-verdt-av-andre>. Published October 27, 2017 (accessed October 24, 2021).
- Markula, P. and Silk, M. (2011) *Qualitative Research for Physical Culture*. London: Palgrave macmillan.
- Morgan, A. (2019) An examination of women's sport sponsorship: A case study of female Australian rules football. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 35(17–18), 1644–1666. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1668463>
- NIF. (n.d.) *Lov for Norges idrettsforbund, olympiskekomite og paralympiske komite*.
- NTB. (2021) Marte Mjelde og Stefan Johansen møttes onsdag i London for å signere avtalen som sikrer lik lønn for herre- og kvinnelandslagsspillerne i fotball. *Nettavisen*. <https://www.nettavisen.no/sport/fotball/landslagskapteinene-signerte-historisk-lonnsavtale/s/12-95-3423398217>. Published December 13, 2017 (accessed October 24, 2021).
- Parry, K. D., Clarkson, B. G., and Rowe, D. (2021) Media framing of women's football during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Communication & Sport*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795211041024>
- Paskins, S. (2023) The red card of all red cards: How FIFA's decision to increase the gap between the men's and the women's World Cup prize monies is a violation of EU Law and the Equal Remuneration Convention. *George Washington International Law Review*, 54(3), 479–510. [https://149801758.v2.pressablecdn.com/wp-content/uploads/03\\_JLE\\_54\\_3\\_Paskins.pdf](https://149801758.v2.pressablecdn.com/wp-content/uploads/03_JLE_54_3_Paskins.pdf)
- Peeters R. and Elling A. (2015) The coming of age of women's football in the Dutch sports media, 1995–2013. *Soccer & Society*, 16(5–6), 620–638.
- Pfister, G. (2010) Women in sport: Gender relations and future perspectives. *Sport in Society*, 13(2), 234–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430903522954>
- Poppelwell-Scevak, C. (2022) The gender pay gap: How FIFA dropped the ball. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 20(1), pp. 325–350. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moac011>
- Rao, A., Stuart, R., and Kelleher, D. (1999) *Gender at work: Organizational change for equality*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Sande, R. E. S. (2019) *Attraktiv og anerkjent? En kritisk diskursanalyse av medieomtalen av kvinnefotball*. Master thesis, NTNU, Trondheim.
- Shaw, S. and Amis, J. (2001) Image and investment: Sponsorship and women's sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, 15(3), pp. 219–246. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.15.3.219>
- Shaw, S., and Slack, T. (2002) “It's been like that for donkey's years”: The construction of gender relations and the cultures of sports organizations. *Culture, Sport, Society*, 5(1), 86–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/71399851>

- Skogvang, B. (2006) Toppfotball: Et felt i forandring. Doctoral dissertation, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo.
- Sogn, H. (2023) *Spilletts gang: En institusjonell etnografisk undersøkelse om kjønn, makt og styring i idrettsorganisasjonen i Norge*. Doctoral dissertation, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo.
- Velija, P., Ratna, A., and Flintoff, A. (2014) Exclusionary power in sports organisations: The merger between the Women's Cricket Association and the England and Wales Cricket Board. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 49(2), 211–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690212455962>