

# **Larp organizing and gender in Norway<sup>1</sup>**

By Ragnhild Hutchison

## **Introduction**

It is often assumed, that the Norwegian larp community is fairly gender balanced and equality minded. This article aims to verify it. Based on information collected from the website laiv.org and from former organizers, the article will discuss changes in gender amongst the organizers in the Norwegian larp scene from 1989 to 2004. Larp organizers are the closest the Norwegian larp community comes to leaders. Studying changes in the gender distribution of organizers does not only tell a part of Norwegian larp history, but also indicates attitudes of and to gender equality and participation amongst young Norwegians.

Little work has been done on gender and leadership in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), neither in Europe nor in Norway (Council of Europe, 2002, p. 69). In Scandinavia and Norway, larp has rarely been the focus of academic study. Grasmø's book "Laiv" gives an in-depth description of Norwegian larp until 1998. However, the book is more of a description and explanation of what Larp is than an analysis, and much has changed since it was published (Grasmø, 1998). In Finland, Leppälähti has studied the Finnish larp community. Her results are published in e.g. "About the Community of Role-Players" in the Solmukohta book of 2004, Beyond Role and Play (Leppälähti, 2004). It had an anthropologists approach to the Finnish larp community, discussing it as a modern tribe. Leppälähti did not focus on gender or on the organizers. In the Knudepunkt book of 2003, As Larp Grows Up, I discussed the changing role of the organizer. In many ways, this article expands my 2003 article (Hutchison, 2003). Gender and larp, and in relation to this, organization, has been the subject of numerous debates at Knutepunkt, the annual Nordic larp conference. However, before discussing gender and organizers in the Norwegian larp community, it is necessary to give a short discussion of methodological problems and an introduction to the Norwegian larp scene.

## **Methodology**

Analyzing the data for this article has met a number of challenges, the main one being inaccuracies concerning data, especially the data concerning the number of larp organizers. This data has been collected from laiv.org's callendarium (laiv.org). In the callendarium, all

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held larps, uncertain if held larps and many of the cancelled larps have been registered. It is not likely, that many held larps are missing. The number of “uncertain” makes it difficult to determine the exact number of larps that have been held. Before 2001 this group is small, however after this year, they constitute an increasing number in the callendarium. The reason is that organizers have not updated the status. The registrations in the callendarium are not always accurate; sometimes one organizer has been left out, other times the wrong person has been registered and sometimes the larp has been registered with only the name of the group, not the names of the organizers. This has been corrected where possible, but it has been impossible to identify all.

Inaccuracy has also been a problem when determining the number of larps which have been held. This has been done by counting “held” or “uncertain if held” larps in the laiv.org callendarium. This will have influenced the results by increasing the number of registered larps, but will still show the gender of those who at one time have been considered as organizers. The data on organizers has been supplemented by questioners to 60 former organizers. Their answers have helped to fill in information lacking from laiv.org, and also they also give an impression of how organizers experienced larp making.

By the help of former organizers it has been possible to collect data on gender and participation on altogether 83 larps 1989 - 2004. The collection is not complete, however, the data supplied should be sufficient to discuss trends. The communities in Trondheim and Oslo will be used as case studies. The Trondheim community has supplied data on nearly all larps held in their area. It has also been possible to gather much data on larps in the Oslo area, primarily from the earliest larps. The data for the Oslo community are fairly representative until about 1996/97. After this time, much data is missing. Furthermore, the lists used to register the gender of the participants in both the Oslo and Trondheim communities in some cases date from some time before the larp, and have not been corrected for sudden changes of participants. The article has rarely used discussions on laiv.org or in other larp forums because claims made there have often been based on assumptions. Furthermore, many of the participants in these discussions are amongst the older of the larpers, thus references to these discussions would favor their perception of the gender situation in larp. Despite the lapses and lack of information in the data, it is still possible to give a fairly accurate picture of changes in the gender distribution of Norwegian organizers.

## Short introduction to the Norwegian larp scene

**Graph 1 Numeric development of Norwegian larps, 1989 - 2004**



The first larps in Norway were held in 1989, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. The two communities have evolved to be the largest, with Oslo in the lead. In the 15 years that have passed, larp communities have emerged in many places around Norway e.g. Vikersund, Ålesund, Stavanger, Holmestrand and Bergen. Many have disappeared after a while.

Parallel to the numerical growth, there has been a decrease in the number of participants per larp. In 1991, Ravn's summer larp had 153 participants, in 1993 it had 104. In comparison, the Ravn larp "1202" in 2003 had 50 participants. Judging from the available data, it seems that the majority of larps since the late 1990's/ early 2000 has had between 30 and 60 participants.

The Norwegian larp community is loosely organized around the web page laiv.org. Parts of the Norwegian larp community is organized in groups, either with members consisting both of participants and organizers, such as Elysium in Bærum, or as groups of organizers such as Arcadia in Trondheim. Many larp organizers and participants are not in any group at all. The lack of any clear organizational structure is typical for many new youth activities (Engelstad & Ødegård, 2003). Attempts have been made to create an umbrella organization; however, this has not met with success. Until recently, larp received little or no external funding, relying primarily on participation fees. This may be slowly changing. In 2004 applications from larps made up 32% of the total number of applications for the fund Frifond teater. (Rune Lundby, Norsk teaterråd, telephone interview, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

## Organizers and gender

A larp organizer in Norway participates in creating the creative background for the larp, the plots and in the writing of the roles. The latter is often the most important identification of an organizer. Some organizers also deal with the practical sides of making larps, such as logistics and sanitation. The organizers are the closest the Norwegian larp community comes to leaders. Until now “*larp ... has no money to give, instead we pay in status and social standing in the community*” (Hutchison, 2003). Organizers, being the ones who make it possible for others to attend larps receive much of such “pay”. Below will follow a quantitative study and discussion of changes in the gender of Norwegian larp organizers.

### Organizers and gender; the numbers

**Table 1: Male and female organizers from 1989 to 2004**

	Male	Female	Male %	Female %
1989	6	0	100	0
1990	7	1	88	12
1991	23	1	96	4
1992	28	3	90	10
1993	35	4	90	10
1994	41	6	87	13
1995	81	15	84	16
1996	81	11	84	16
1997	54	14	79	21
1998	46	31	60	40
1999	66	35	65	35
2000	95	50	66	34
2001	106	43	71	28
2002	86	37	70	30
2003	86	47	64	35
2004	115	49	70	30

In Table 1 the gender of the organizers is registered, not the individual. Thus, a female organizer who has made e.g. two larps in a year has been registered twice. This leads to over registration; however it is still possible to identify trends and developments. Table 1 shows that there has been an increase of female organizers since the beginning of larp in 1989. The growth has taken shape as a gradual increase until 94/95, speeding up in 96 and 97, and a sudden spurt and top in 98 when girls constituted 40% of the organizers. The top was

followed by six stable years where girls constituted approximately 30 – 35%. The high number of female organizers in 98 and 99 corresponds with numbers in table 2 showing that in these two years, larps organized by groups with 50% or more female organizers constituted approximately 50% of the larps organized.

Table 1 also shows that since 2000, the number of female organizers has stabilized at around 40 to 50 persons. Numerically this is more than a quadrupling of the number of female organizers since 1994, however, their proportion of the organizers has fallen. In 1998, 31 girls organized larps, constituting 40% of the total number of organizers. In 2004, 49 girls organized, however, they constituted only 30%. One explanation for this is that much of the increase in the number of larps since 2000 has occurred in new areas such as Stavanger, Tromsø; Vikersund, Kongsberg and Mandal. In many of these communities there were fewer girls in the organizing groups than in the Oslo and Trondheim communities.

**Table 2: Distribution of gender and number of larps between 1989 and 2004**

	<b>100% males</b>	<b>75% males</b>	<b>50% males</b>	<b>25% males</b>	<b>0% males</b>	<b>Sum of larps</b>
1989	2					2
1990	1	1				2
1991	6	1				7
1992	6	2			2	10
1993	11	3	1			15
1994	13	5	0			18
1995	15	3	1	2	1	22
1996	16	6	0	2		24
1997	13	3	2	0	3	21
1998	6	9	2	3	7	27
1999	7	7	9	3	1	24
2000	16	7	6	7	9	47
2001	18	7	11	3	5	41
2002	17	6	9	4	5	41
2003	22	10	4	9	5	50
2004	26	12	7	6	4	55

Table 2 shows that the gender distribution in the organizing groups has become more even over time. The first all-female organized larps were registered in 1992. Unfortunately it has not been possible to discover more about them. The first well-known all-girls organized larp was “Jentelaiven/ Bylaiven” in 1995 in Oslo. Since 2000 the number of all-girls organizing

groups has stabilized at 4-5, while the number of groups with female majority, has varied more.

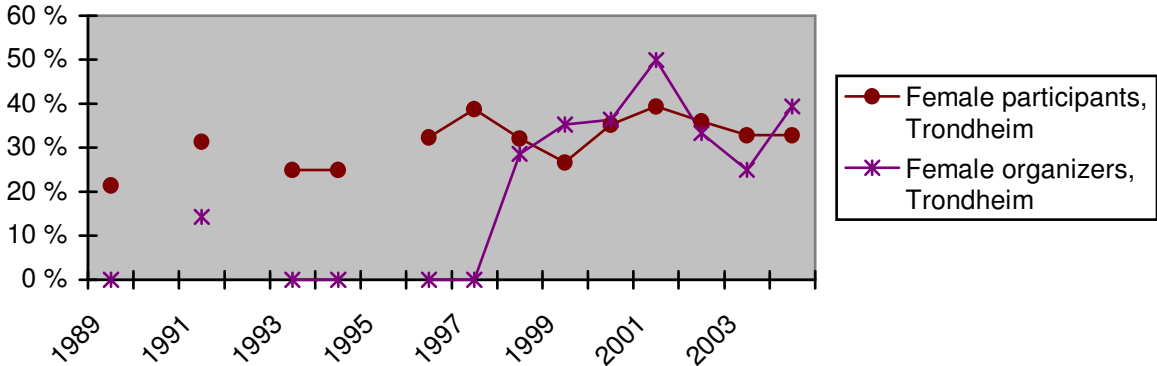
The first time a group had 50% or more women was in 1993. Table 2 also shows that the first time 50% or more of the organizing groups had female participants constituting more than 20% was in 1996. At that time there were 16 larps organized by boys only, 16 with more than 20% girls. Since most groups consist of 3-5 organizers, 20% would be one girl.

Judging from the data supplied by former organizers, it can be concluded that the overall majority of larps with more than 80 participants have been made by male dominated groups. Female dominated organizing groups have mostly made larps for 20 to 40 participants, i.e. within the norm of the recent years. However, data for many of the larger larps since 1998 is lacking. Some of these larps, such as “Wanted” and “Den Enes Død 1” were made by organizing groups with about half female organizers.

*Trondheim and Oslo*

Case studies of the larp communities in Trondheim and Oslo can give more insight into the gender distribution of organizers. The data supplied for these communities is more detailed, making it possible to discover the representation of female organizers, compared both to male organizers and female participants.

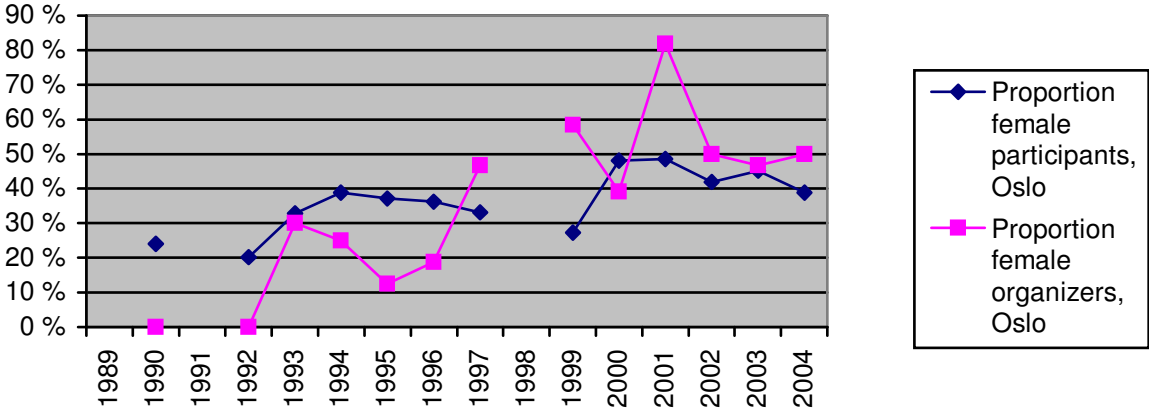
**Graph 2: Proportion of female organizers compared with the proportion of female participants. Trondheim**



Source: data from 30 larps in Trondheim supplied by former organizers.

Graph 2 is based on data supplied by former organizers and shows that the female participation in the Trondheim community has been between 20% and 40% since the start. Female participation seems to have stabilized at approximately 35% in the last 5 years. In comparison, there were none or few female organizers before 1998. In 1998, this changed radically; suddenly girls made up approximately 30% of the organizers, and then 50% in 2000. Since then, the percentage of female organizers has stabilized at about 35%, approximately the same proportion which they constitute as participants

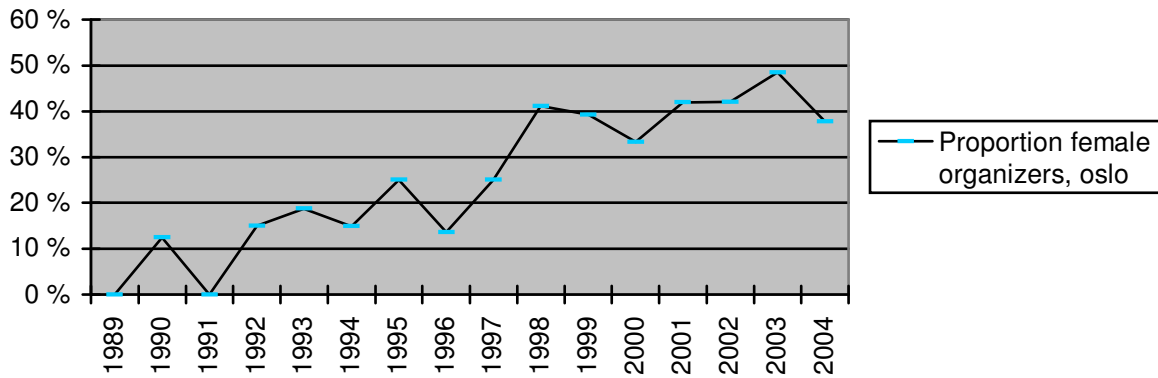
**Graph 3: Proportion of female organizers compared with the proportion of female participants. Oslo**



Source: data supplied by former organizers. Altogether 39 larps in Oslo and 30 larps in Trondheim.

Graph 3 is based on data from the organizers. From 1996/97 it is less accurate than graph 2 because of incomplete data. Nevertheless, it can still indicate trends. One is that female participants already from the early 1990s constituted approximately 20%-30%, slowly increasing to a bit more than 40% in more recent years. This coincides with observations in Trondheim. Another is that girls began organizing in the early 1990's, approximately 5-6 years before girls in Trondheim.

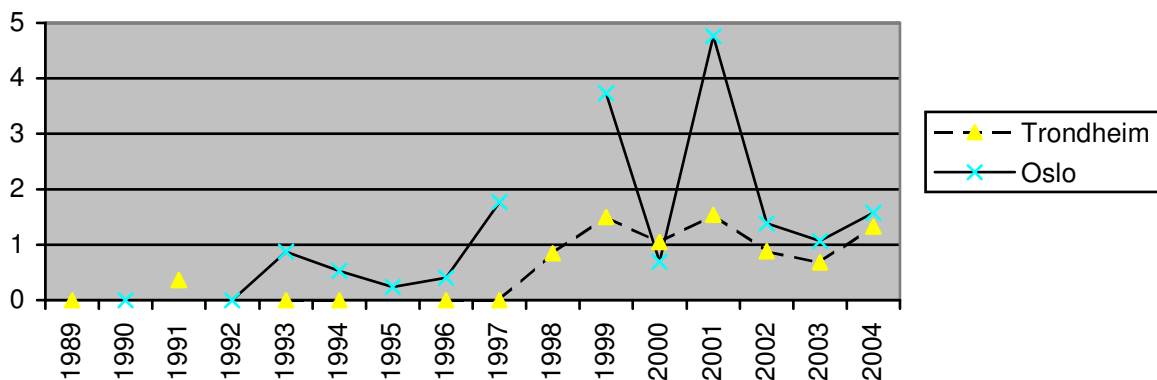
**Graph 4: Proportion of female organizers in Oslo.**



Source: data from 39 larps in Oslo supplied by former organizers.

Graph 4 shows a more accurate development of female organizers in Oslo than graph 3 because it is based on the laiv.org callendarium. It shows the same increase of female organizers in the years 96/97/98 as in the Trondheim community. It also shows, as graph 3, that the girls in Oslo began organizing earlier than those in Trondheim. The proportion of female organizers seems to have stabilized at about 40% since 1998.

**Graph 5: Proportion of male and female organizers, compared to their proportion as participants. Oslo and Trondheim**



Source: data supplied by former organizers. Altogether 39 larps in Oslo and 30 larps in Trondheim.

Graph 5 shows which gender is better represented as organizers, compared to their proportion as participants. When the number is larger than 1; female organizers are better represented than their male colleagues. If it is less than 1; female organizers are less represented than men. If it is 1; both genders constitute the same proportion as organizers as they do as participants.

Graph 5 sums up the quantitative development of female organizers in Trondheim and Oslo. It shows that in Trondheim, men dominated as organizers until 1997. However, after 1998, female organizers became better represented than male, compared to their proportion of the participants. This also happened in Oslo, but earlier than in Trondheim.

### Organizers experiences

Numbers and graphs describe the situation and developments of women as organizers in the Norwegian larp community. However, to learn more about how organizers experienced being organizers, especially from a gender perspective, it has been necessary to use questionnaires. 27 female and 33 male former organizers were chosen randomly. Of these, 16 men and 14 women replied, representing organizers from the whole 15 years of larps history in Norway, both those who have organized numerous larps, and those who have organized only one.

All the organizers, irrespective of gender, felt they had learned much from larp organizing. They focused primarily on having learned the importance of structure and organization of work, and on logistics surrounding the actual event. Many also mentioned that they had learned much about finances, communication and handling stressful situations.

The majority of both male and female had initiated at least one larp, either as part of a group, or on their own. Three of the girls said they had not taken initiatives, but instead been “headhunted”. Two girls had taken initiative to a larp because their larp organization “needed an activity”. Few of the organizers had met any reactions on their gender in relation to their role as organizers. Of the girls, four said they had; one said the reactions had only been positive, another told of a comment from a participant saying she “organized like a man”. One of the guys had received comments relating to him lacking practical abilities e.g. not being able to pitch a tent. The overall majority of the organizers had experienced support and backing of some sort from the community both during the making and while considering making a larp.

The answers also reflect differences in opinions regarding whether women and men organize differently. The split was irrespective of gender. Some of those who answered, said they thought that women were better at writing roles, intrigues and plots, and that their larps focused more on social realism and history. Boys on the other hand, were perceived as

making larps with more fighting. Others said, that they thought there were different ways of organizing larp, but that gender was not a relevant explanation. Instead they focused on the individual differences of organizers and organizing groups. Many also pointed to age as an important explanation, e.g. that fantasy larps with fighting tends to be made by younger organizers, whilst murder mystery larp at hotels tend to be made by older organizers.

They were also asked if they felt they mastered being larp organizers. Seven out of the 16 men answered that they in some way felt insecure. Some said they felt they should be more structured in their work, others that they did not master the practical sides of larp making. Of the girls, only three said they did not master being larp organizers. These said they felt they did not have control of all the uncertainties involved in larp making.

### **Discussion**

The results from both the quantitative and the qualitative part of the article indicate that the larp community is an equality-minded youth community, where both men and women have equal access to the leadership positions as organizers. Nevertheless, it may be that the girls do not realize or perhaps admit that they have been treated unequally. This has been found to occur in a number of male dominated sectors. In order to fit in, girls do not want to draw attention to their gender, nor be perceived as complaining; thus they turn a blind eye to discrimination (Ørjasæter, 2004). A similar reaction amongst female organizers could be expected. The confidence with which the girls regard their own larp organizing skills may be understood as a wish to be perceived as equally qualified organizers. However, none of the results which have been discussed in this article support such a claim. Female participation was between 20% and 40% already from the start of the two largest larp communities. Furthermore, despite that the girls began organizing later than the guys, graph 5 shows that the proportion of female organizers often has been higher than their proportion of the participants.

The high participation of girls in leading positions makes the Norwegian larp community stand out compared to other cultural activities. According to the Council of Europe's publication "Going for gender balance", research has shown that women are often well represented in the grass root of an organization or community, but few in leadership roles (Council of Europe, 2002). This coincides with Anne Lorentsens finds in her study of the Norwegian rock music community, another cultural activity dominated by young people. Not

only did she find few women in positions of leadership, she also found that female rock musicians were perceived as different, and sometimes not as good as their male counterparts. To be respected as musicians and achieve leadership positions, the girls took on roles as “one of the boys”, in “her own category” or “rebellious” (Lorentzen, 2001). The quantitative data and the answers to the questioner referred to in this article do not reflect such a situation in the Norwegian larp community. The high number of female participants from the start might well have made it unnecessary for the girls to take on certain roles, as girls in rock music, in order to be accepted as organizers.

It is more fruitful to compare the participation of female organizers in the larp community with youth NGOs such as the environmental youth movement “Natur og Ungdom” or political youth organizations. Research done in connection to “Makt- og Demokratiutredningen” shows that that these communities and organizations also experienced a large growth of women in leadership positions in the late 1990’s (Engelstad & Ødegård, 2003). Unfortunately, there has been no research why this happened in these NGOs.

A possible explanation for why there was a sudden increase of female larp organizers in the mid/late 1990’s is that there occurred a change of organizer generations. After 1996, there was an increasing number of new organizers, of both genders. Furthermore; few of those who had organized before 1996, many of whom had been important in establishing Norwegian, stopped making larps. This change of generations is also visible in graph 1 as a fall in the number of organized larps. The fall represents a year with few larps because the “old” organizers stopped and the new generation not yet taken over.

There were more girls in the new generation of larp organizers than previously. In Oslo, the change began already in ca 1995/96 with larps such as “Romjulslaiven”, “Kybergenesis”, “Jentelaiven/ Bylaiven”, “Bronselaven”. The change came approximately three to four years later to Trondheim. In Trondheim, Soria Moria, the first larp organizing group is still active, thus the generation change took form as an increase of organizer groups. It seems that most of the new generation of larp organizers became larpers in the early/ mid 1990’s, but there is not sufficient data to determine this exactly. It has also not been possible to determine if there is a difference in how long girls and guys are participants before they organize a larp.

Looking at who has and is organizing larps presently, it is possible that another generation change is presently taking place in the Norwegian larp community. Many of the organizers from the late 1990's/ early 2000's are fading out of the organizing scene and are replaced by new ones. This is further supported by the fall in the number of larps in 2001/02 and the following growth. This is similar to what happened in 1995/96.

It is difficult to say if there is a difference in larps made by male or female dominated organizing groups. It does not seem that the size of the larp is linked to gender of the organizers. Large larps have generally been made by male dominated groups, but the majority of these were held in the early 1990's, a time when there were few female organizers. The increase of female organizers has influenced the reduction of larp size, but it is not because girls make unusually small larps. Their larps are a part of an overall numerical increase.

Answers in the questionnaires indicate that there is a division in the community regarding the perception of differences between male and female organizers. Parts of the traditional gender stereotypes are still present, represented through the claims that girls focus more on relationships and feelings and boys more on fighting when they make larps. It has not been possible to determine if these assumptions are correct. That would imply creating a categorization of different forms of larp, a task too daunting for this article.

Related to the issue of stereotypes it is interesting to find that nearly half the male organizers felt that structure and practical tasks were skills which they did not completely master. Both these skills are traditionally part of the male stereotype of being handy and in control. The insecurity may be explained by the uncertainty which surrounds what is "male" and "male ideals" in modern society after the feminist revolution. Another possible explanation is age. Many of those who felt insecure were in their early twenties and had made fewer larps than the others. However, it should be said that also some of the organizers with numerous larps on their track record were also humble. It may also be that the older male organizers answered with more humility because they feared they would be perceived or presented as too self confident in an article they knew would be written by a female larper and read by the community. The women's confidence may be motivated by the same; the need to show confidence and strength to defend their positions as organizers in an article that will be read in the community.

## **Conclusion**

The Norwegian larp community is fairly gender balanced. For the past five to seven years, girls have made up approximately 30 to 40% of the organizers. Since the start in 1989, girls have constituted between a third and half of the participants of Norwegian larps. This is the same number as the Norwegian government wants in board rooms. The girls began organizing later than the guys, nevertheless, there is little to indicate that they have met significant barriers when taking on the leadership positions as larp organizers. Based on the data available in this article it can thus be concluded that both men and women have fairly equal access to leadership roles in the Norwegian larp community, and that both genders have taken them. The highest number of female organizers occurred in the late 1990's, when girls constituted 40% of the organizers, and even 50% in one community. In general, it seems that the proportion of female organizers is approximately the same as the proportion they constitute as participants. The high female participation in leading positions from the late 1990's can be explained by a change of organizer generations. There was also a similar increase of girls in leadership positions in Norwegian youth NGOs. Unfortunately, no one has performed any studies of why this occurred.

It also seems that larp organizers may be struggling with old and seeking new gender stereotypes. Female organizers are predominantly confident about their competences as organizers; the male organizers show more uncertainty. The uncertainty is connected to ideals which traditionally have been linked to the male stereotype and changes that are occurring in it. This article leaves many questions unanswered; some are linked to the sudden growth of female organizers in the 1990's, and others are linked to changes in masculine and feminine ideals. However, first and foremost, the article shows the need for further study into youth activities such as larp. It is through such studies we can find indications of the values that may dominate our future.

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### **About the author:**

Ragnhild Hutchison (1976) has been active in the Oslo larp community since 1993 and has organized 5 larps. She has a Master in history and is currently a research assistant at the Norwegian Institute of Local History.

### **Appendix 1:**

Number of larps held in Norway (source: Kalendariet, [www.laiv.org](http://www.laiv.org))

1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
2	2	7	10	15	18	22	24	21	27	24	47
2001	2002	2003	2004								
41	41	50	55								