No problems with gender equality in Denmark... I beg your pardon?

Once in a while I am in danger of falling off my chair, out of the window and into the harbour when people who should know better make extraordinary claims on behalf of Danish equality. From the most unexpected quarters we hear that, with the exception of immigrant women who represent a very special challenge, there are no problems with gender equality in Denmark! And that is simply not true. Even though Denmark can be proud of our place at the top of the European league when it comes to the number of women in work, we are also way down the European statistics register when it comes to the number of women in top positions. In this respect Denmark is just as noteworthy a loser at No. 28 on the list, only outdone by Malta and Cyprus.

Surely this Danish paradox in the gender equality department cannot escape anyone’s attention. Fortunately the choice is no longer between family and job. But perhaps the choice for women is still between family and career? A symptom of unresolved issues in gender equality.

The potential is there for all to see. Just imagine – what if we dared, could and really wanted to take the next big step. More men working in the public sector, more men working in the caring professions, more men on assigned paternity leave and many many more talented women working at top management level. And that includes top political positions, especially in local government which is sorely in need of an overhaul. Just imagine if we got down to the task of solving the obvious problems that are pushing Denmark out of today’s Scandinavian gender equality elite, of which we were a natural member until a few years ago. Just imagine if we collaborated on developing a winning strategy for gender equality throughout Danish society? And perhaps that would release so many extra resources that we would be able to regenerate ambitions in other areas. More staff in crèches, kindergartens and nursing homes, and greater respect for the major contribution made by care workers in the public sector.

Let’s make this line of work so attractive that even men want to get involved.

And the much-courted immigrant women, whom so many are so willing to help. What about them? If we look at the striking difference between isolated women with profound problems and young dynamic women who are forging ahead, then we realise that it makes no sense whatsoever to talk about ‘immigrant women’ as one uniform social category. Many young women from an ethnic minority background are breaking new ground to an extent and at a pace that might well cause us to wonder if their example will in fact show the rest of the female population how to pursue a career. Measures of support should therefore be targeted according to needs, but helping women from minority ethnic groups must not be used to hide the fundamental problems still affecting the majority of Danish women.

WELCOME TO KVINFO!
“Women have had to listen to men for all these years – and so on this occasion we would like to return the favour!”

- as one of the organisers said at the festivities held on 3 May 1908 at Copenhagen City Hall in celebration of the electoral law allowing women to participate in local elections.

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS FOR WOMEN’S RIGHT TO VOTE

With the passing of a new electoral law on 20 April 1908, Danish women finally won the right to vote at local elections and to stand for office in local government. A long struggle for women’s right to vote had mobilised tens of thousands of activists, and women’s electoral rights had become a national cause. On 12 March 1909 Danish women were able to vote for the first time at local government elections.

Women’s entry into local politics is a major, albeit often overlooked, milestone in the history of gender equality and democracy. KVINFO therefore marked the anniversary with a whole centenary year running from 20 April 2008 until 12 March 2009, casting new light on issues of gender and politics from both a historical and a contemporary vantage point. The idea took off across the country, with a wide-ranging programme including public discussion meetings, exhibitions and media coverage.

The centenary year got underway on 20 April with a parade through the streets of Copenhagen. About 3,500 people, accompanied by decorated floats, music, camels and sunshine, followed the route from Frederiksberg Town Hall to Copenhagen City Hall, where the Copenhagen local authority arranged a celebration in City Hall Square with speakers and a concert by Anne Linnet.

Many women’s organisations, trade unions and the political parties joined in the parade, which had been organised by LO (Danish Federation of Trade Unions) and 3F (United Federation of Danish Workers). KVINFO also took part, of course, and in honour of the occasion we went out on the road with our own parade float.

A wealth of information about voting rights at kvinfo.dk

To mark the centenary of women’s right to vote, KVINFO has launched a new ‘electoral rights’ section where we gather facts, research and stories relating to women in local politics over the last 100 years.

In 1909, 127 women were elected to the then 1,206 local authorities, corresponding to 1.3% of the total number of local government members. The KVINFO website provides information about these women politicians and how they experienced the first period of service on local government councils.

The electoral rights site also looks at women’s political participation in Danish local government after 1909. Today, 100 years later, the 27% female representation in local authorities still lags far behind the Danish parliament and also the other Scandinavian countries. KVINFO’s forum for information and discussion about women in local politics thus also highlights a major and current challenge facing Danish society: to get more women involved in local politics.
Men have something of a monopoly when it comes to seats on the town councils. In 2009 only one in four local council members is a woman. And 93% of local authorities also have a male mayor. This is just one of the many riddles of gender politics. Research has hitherto focused on women's representation at a national level. KVINFO therefore prepared a festschrift, Women in Local Politics 1909-2009, in order to redress the balance.

The festschrift presents leading scholars in the field, new research into the struggle for the right to vote and it shows how women are the architects of the welfare state. A number of local authorities with a good record on gender equality are also profiled, and the festschrift discusses why Denmark has fallen behind in a Scandinavian context and the measures necessary to get more women involved in local politics.

The festschrift received financial support from the Danish Ministry of Social Welfare and the Copenhagen local authority.

**Democracy and theory in practice**

Personal stories met political analyses when a city mayor, an author and a number of academics took to the stage during the conference “A Century of Local Government Democracy and Women’s Power.” With this arrangement on 9 March 2009, KVINFO brought the centenary year of women’s right to vote to a festive close.

See the festschrift Kvinder i kommunalpolitik 1909-2009 at www.kvinfo.dk.
“Once you have used all your money on eBay, got up-to-date with all the celebrity gossip and tried out all the beauty tips on ostrogen.dk, then there’s another website that is more than worth a visit. Kvinfo.dk is full of information about gender, equality and Danish women’s history, and it is one of Denmark’s best and most stylish websites about and for women. Here you can run a search in the Expert Database, keep up with the latest research and read quirky and interesting articles on women and men, all seen through a gender-lens. (...) And, no, it’s not boring, not dry and not just for ‘bluestockings’ or bra-burners.”

**BORROW A BOOK**
At the heart of KVINFO there lies a national research and specialist library – its 20,000+ books and journals record, collect and disseminate Danish and international research and scholarship pertaining to women, gender and men. This is the central function from which our activities have grown ever since Nynne Koch started KVINFO in 1964.

**KEEP UP TO DATE**
Upwards of 13,000 people subscribe to one or more of the kvinfo.dk newsletters. KVINFO offers a news service spanning diverse areas of general to specific information, and which caters for a wide target group, from practitioners to people with a general interest to journalists and gender scholars.

**LOOK SOMETHING UP**
At kvinfo.dk we provide information on subjects associated with gender, equal opportunities and Danish women’s history. Find experts in their field, borrow books, keep up with the latest research and read quirky, interesting articles.
"Dansk Kvindehistorie" (Danish women’s history) at www.kvinfo.dk is a unique medium for information about Danish women’s history, and it is a much-visited site, particularly by students at school or in further education. The site offers both the quick general survey of milestones and pioneers on the route to political and legal equality, and also the chance to study the debate on gender equality in the 1880s, for example, via documents from the early days of the women’s movement.

Providing up-to-date information and research on women’s cultural heritage is one of KVINFO’s key assignments, and our historical resources are constantly developed and expanded.

"Kvindekilder" in new design
In 2008 the “Kvindekilder” section under “Dansk Kvindehistorie” was redesigned and new functions have been added making the web archives easier to search.

The struggle for education and employment, the women’s liberation movement and abortion rights are just some of the themes featured. Via articles with links to original historical source material, such as newspapers, laws and reminiscences, the visitor to the site can delve into women’s lives over the last 100 years or more and the endeavours to achieve equality of opportunity in Denmark.

From online biographical dictionary to information exchange
Dansk Kvindebiografisk Leksikon (Danish Women’s Biographical Dictionary) is one of KVINFO’s most popular online resources. We are now inviting users to supply extra information for the biographies.

As of 2009 it is possible to add information, pictures and external links to any of the 1,924 original profiles, which were all written by experts and which will remain unchanged and continue to constitute the scholarly heart of the reference site. The project has received funding from Kulturnet Danmark.

Nordic women’s literature on the internet
1,000 years of women’s writing will be guaranteed a worldwide readership when the History of Nordic Women’s Literature goes online in 2011 at KVINFO’s history of women portal. The project is being funded by the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and A.P. Møller og Hustru Chastine McKinney Møllers Fond til almene Formaal.

"Fascinating and instructive website. I recommend it. My father (47) finds it interesting, and that says something about a site on the subject of women’s history..."

"I think it’s good that we can explore the lives of women through the ages. Many women have done something special, and that deserves to be remembered."

"I wish there was an equivalent website about men..."
“In the middle of the media revolution, the story of KVINFO’s cultural journal FORUM FOR GENDER AND CULTURE is somewhat of an eye-opener. A thundering success from which our media barons could perhaps learn a thing or two”

Web magazine FORUM for køn og kultur (forum for discussion of gender and cultural issues) carries topical articles – always, of course, seen through a gender-lens.

KVINFO’s database of experts lists women specialists in all areas. If, for example, you are looking for someone to give a professional opinion or a woman candidate for a board of directors, you’ll find her here.

Kvinfo.dk also highlights topical issues of all sorts, from plastic surgery, teaching and headscarves to EU equal opportunities policy.
The Invisible Success focuses on the good integration stories – with 60 unique and extraordinary stories told by women and men about their lives in Denmark. In words, pictures and sound, we see and hear them seize opportunities and tackle challenges presented by contemporary Danish society.

We get to know people who are not afraid to put words to feelings, to breaking-points, to love and to finding identity and a place in life. Their lives are invisible and unknown quantities to the general public, and this invisibility helps to maintain the idea of inadequate integration.

The stories also draw attention to the new routes and lifestyles that are growing out of living within Danish society, and which run contrary to the predominant and negative stereotypes of women and men from minority groups.

Editor Elisabeth Andersen and photographer Tine Harden show us a different picture – images of capable and active women and men against their many and varied backdrops.

The Invisible Success is made up of two separate projects – New Men in Denmark and The Invisible Success – based on the same concept. Both websites are furnished with short guidelines for teachers and ideas for using the material in primary and secondary schools and language schools.

The powerful photographs and moving stories of The Invisible Success will be visiting public libraries across Denmark – an exhibition travelling until 2010, organised in collaboration with Styrelsen for Bibliotek og Medier (Danish Agency for Libraries and Media) and Statsbibliotekets BiblioteksCenter for Integration (Centre for Integration, State and University Library Aarhus).

The Invisible Success received international recognition when named as a best practice in the EU Handbook on Integration. A number of stories from The Invisible Success are translated into English and can be found at KVINFO’s English website, All About Gender.

I really like your The Invisible Success site, and I’ve used it when teaching courses in media and cultural coexistence.

Lecturer, Centre for Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark

Fascinating, wide-ranging documents, often with a sting and humour too. Your eyes fill up now and then, despite the matter-of-Fact, thought-provoking, predominantly sober presentation that avoids sentimentality (...) There’s new substance to put in the equation here.

Teacher, Borupgård Gymnasium

We used [one of the stories] as the basis for discussion about how your own values are influenced by your new country, and we also used it with some of the participants on the course who are writing their own life stories. What’s more, the story triggered a real desire in the whole group to talk about themselves and their lives, which was perhaps the best thing.

Teacher, Horrems Language Centre

Photos: Tina Harden
Visitors from home and abroad often come to KVINFO for information on aspects of gender equality and feminism. We also arrange lectures on gender issues for the schools and businesses that contact us.

**Dream of the ‘Whole Person’**
A literary matinee focusing on women writers of the interwar years
In Dronningesalen at the Royal Danish Library on 20 September 2008, writers Ursula Andkjær Olsen, Katrine Marie Guldager and Helle Helle read from works written by women authors during the interwar period. Between the readings, Lillian Munk Rüsing, Anette Dina Sørensen, Lars Bukdahl and Elisabeth Helfer Jensen talked about the era and the literary works. The afternoon ended with a reception in KVINFO’s library. The readings and discussions could later be heard as a podcast at kvinfo.dk.

**Men - The Undetected Sex**
A lecture series held in KVINFO’s library, March-April 2008
In collaboration with Folkeuniversitetet (Danish University Extension), KVINFO regularly arranges lecture series focusing on the most recent research into gender issues. Men - the Undetected Sex demonstrated the breadth of studies being undertaken in Denmark on the subject of men, masculinities and gender identities.

KVINFO regularly hosts events, here are a random few
A Danish information centre like KVINFO collaborates regularly with organisations such as DIS (Danish Institute for Study Abroad), Colgate University (USA) and the Danish company COWI, organising group visits at which we give an introduction to Danish equal opportunities legislation and the work of KVINFO. In international conferences abroad, KVINFO staff members may also be asked to give papers, for example, three members of KVINFO staff gave papers at the international conference Women’s World held in Madrid, for example. KVINFO also participates in international conferences and workshops on issues relating to women and gender equality. KVINFO also contributes to the general European discussion on gender and equal opportunities by means of participation in various forums of the EU.
By believing in the meeting between people, by starting from the personal story and by using a simple no-frills method based on the voluntary pairing of a mentor and a mentee, KVINFO’s Mentor Network has benefited the integration process to a degree that has reaped acclaim both at home and abroad.

By matching women who are new to Denmark with women who are well-versed in the Danish workplace, KVINFO’s mentoring network points up the fact that women from refugee or immigrant backgrounds often simply need one last push in order to activate their resources and potential in the Danish job market and in Danish society. The massive influx of enterprising and capable mentors shows that there is a great interest among Danish ‘majority women’ to take on social responsibility and make a difference for ‘minority women’ on the one-to-one level. The network has established a bridge for communication between the individual and the rest of the community, drawing on experience from the feminist movement’s solidarity between women.

The importance of role models
KVINFO’s Mentor Network in Århus has assembled a corps of role models from ethnic minority backgrounds in the project “Brug for alle i Danmark” [Denmark Needs Us All]. Hear their stories at http://rollemodeller.dk/ where you can also book a role model.

The Mentor Network also arranges events, workshops, and courses for mentors and mentees. The courses have been made possible by funding from BIKUFONFONDEN.

In the autumn of 2004, KVINFO’s Mentor Network received the Annual Award from the Danish women’s magazine ‘Alt for Damerne’. In that same year the Network also received the annual ‘integration prize’ for the public labour market by the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs. The international organisation OECD has highlighted KVINFO’s mentoring network as one of Denmark’s outstanding integration projects.

The Mentor Network is funded by a basic grant from the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, supplemented by the participating local authorities.

"Meet someone else and start from the beginning, right from the very beginning, on your picture of yourself”

Niels Frank
Dialogue and Cooperation on Women’s Rights in the Arab Region – is the title of a major regional programme organised by KVINFO in the Middle East and North Africa. Since 2006 we have been involved in strengthening gender equality and women’s rights in a number of Arab countries by means of collaboration, support from experts plus the planning and coordination of partnership projects. Today we have associates in Rabat, Morocco, and a large number of collaborators both in the region and in Denmark.

The regional programme “Dialogue and Cooperation on Women’s Rights” focuses on four strategic areas:

- Legal change
- Women’s participation in the public sphere
- Domestic violence
- Research, documentation and information on gender-related issues

Danish-Arab collaboration to combat violence against women

In June 2008, 25 women from 8 Arab nations and Denmark met at a seminar on “Domestic Violence”, held at Magleås conference centre. All were professionals working with women victims of violence, but in very different circumstances – as became clear when women from, for example, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Lebanon and Morocco spent three days discussing their strategies and experience across the national and cultural divide.

Violence against women is one of the central issues in which there is great interest for a collaborative approach within the regional programme run by KVINFO in the Middle East and North Africa.

KVINFO and Dannerhuset (Danish crisis centre and shelter for women and children) are therefore organising a Danish-Arab training seminar for workers in crisis centres, to be held in the autumn of 2009. Dannerhuset has already participated in a staff exchange programme with a crisis centre in Morocco, while the Danish Observatory on Violence against Women has collaborated with Moroccan organisations in promoting the importance of such observatories both in a national and regional context.
Courses in conflict mediation

Morocco is often highlighted as a progressive model in North Africa and the Middle East with regard to legal gender equality. A new family law was introduced in 2004, officially putting Moroccan women in a better position than women in most other Arab countries. KVINFO heads up a major programme designed to support the implementation of the law in Moroccan society. The law ensures, among other things, better opportunities for divorce and improved rights for the woman upon divorce – but also advocates the process of mediation between spouses before a divorce is granted. A Moroccan judge, enjoying great authority in the community and used to having the final word, might find it quite a challenge to undertake the role of mediator and guide the contending parties in an endeavour to find their own solution to their differences.

This, however, was exactly what faced 18 Moroccan judges when they enthusiastically embarked on, among other exercises, role play during a course in conflict mediation led by two experts from Denmark – Manu Sareen, consultant, and Karin Kliem Dahlgaard from the Department of Family Affairs under the Ministry of Justice. The course took place in May 2008 in the town of Ifrane, and was part of a long-term strategy designed to ensure that all judges in Morocco are trained in conflict mediation.

The aim is to integrate conflict mediation into the judges’ training at Institut Supérieur de la Magistrature, the Moroccan partner in the project.

KVINFO has been assigned to involve other sectors of Danish civil society in the collaborative project with Arab associates to promote women’s rights. One approach is via the Foundation for Dialogue and Cooperation on Women’s Rights, which KVINFO administers.

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Mother is the first mentor we meet. Mothers are always our role models and our helpers, sometimes the reverse. All evolution is a matter of children not wanting to be like their parents. All revolution is a matter of daughters not wanting to be like their mothers.

In my lifetime women have become much better off than their foremothers. More freedom and more opportunities. But we’ve also become less well-off in a more interesting way. Our mothers weren’t particularly well-educated, often lazy and irresponsible and rebellious in their own peculiar way. I didn’t want to be like them, I wanted to be something else, although I had no idea what.

I would think – and now I’m following my imagination – that many of the women refugees have mothers left behind in the land of their birth – and that the very reason they fled was that they didn’t want to be like them.

They didn’t want to stay behind in the village like their mothers while the bombs rained down. Or wait to be surprised by armed house-guests, and be subjected to atrocities.

They didn’t want to queue for hours on end holding a feeding bowl in a local refugee camp, like their mothers had for years on end and just gone along with it.

The women who fled ran a risk because they wouldn’t live the lives of their mothers. They wanted to live a different life, a new life, which they have sometimes had the energy to share with their mothers. With their daughters, at least.

Suzanne Brøgger

MEETINGS WITH POTENTIAL

In the autumn of 2009 KVINFO’s Mentor Network will be hosting an international conference on women’s mentoring and networking. Interested participants from around the globe will gather in Copenhagen to share expertise and ideas.

At the conference website mnw.kvinfo.dk women from the network tell about their meetings and the potential they have identified and worked on together – both for the Danish mentors and for the women who have come to Denmark as immigrants and refugees.

The Danish author Suzanne Brøgger has contributed to the website with these thoughts on role models, change and opportunities across generations and borders.
KVINFO is an information centre and research library for the study of gender, equality and ethnicity. Our primary assignment is to initiate and disseminate research and to play a role in the promotion of a society based on equality.

Background
The idea for KVINFO goes back to the mid-1960s. Nyinne Koch was working as an office assistant at the Royal Library in Copenhagen and she noticed that scholarly literature on subjects relating to women's lives and history was not being catalogued properly. She therefore used a considerable proportion of her working day in constructing a bibliography – which became the nucleus of what is today KVINFO's library.

Users of the bibliography were served in a temporary hut in the Royal Library Gardens, while the demand for literature grew steadily in the wake of the new women's movements and the new women's studies forums. In 1982 KVINFO moved into premises in Læsøgade in central Copenhagen, as an independent institution, for a trial period. Nyinne Koch set to work on building up a library, published the journal “Forum” and organised courses and lectures.

In 1987 KVINFO gained the status of a self-governing institution with a fixed annual grant. The name KVINFO – from Kvinder (women), Information (information) and forskning (research) – was formalised and the institution was assigned the job of informing an interested public about research into issues relating to women and to gender.

Since 2003 KVINFO has run the Mentor Network, an award-winning network that matches refugee and immigrant women with women active in the Danish workplace, and since 2006 KVINFO has worked together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on current projects under Det Arabiske Initiativ (The Arab Initiative).
New Men in Denmark is a series of portraits of ethnic minority men living in Denmark, focusing on successful integration.

In 2008, the website won the “Best on the Net” prize, awarded by the Danish Ministry of Science and the National IT and Telecom Agency to the best public sector websites.