Gender Perspectives on Danish Municipal Politics
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Foreword

On November 19, the Danes will have the opportunity to elect representatives for 98 Municipal Councils and 5 Regional Councils. In doing so they participate in the formal Danish democracy at the lowest level of the system – with elections for the Parliament being the highest level.

This year DIPD is using the opportunity of the municipal election to invite partners from most of the countries we are working in to ‘participate’ as observers, and hopefully to learn and be inspired. It is not the purpose of the study tour to convince delegates that the Danish system is the best in the world, or a system suited to the challenges facing countries as diverse as Bhutan and Bolivia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to mention just a few. The major purpose is to share the Danish model with our colleagues, and then for them to discuss their experiences and decide what they can benefit from in their own environment.

In the seminar, Elisabeth Møller Jensen, who is the Director of KVINFO (the Danish Centre for Research and Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity), will present some key gender perspectives on the municipal elections. However, together with KVINFO we have selected four texts/articles that can shed a more detailed light on the historical developments in women’s representation in municipal councils, and thus also provide an insight into developments in gender research in the political sciences over the past 25 years.

Danish political history is characterised by slow and uneven developments in women’s representation, by women’s representation rates being higher in Parliament than on municipal councils, and by the fact that the women’s movement has played a central part in the struggle for a higher degree of women’s representation.

Causes for low women’s representation and sluggish development have accordingly been central themes for researchers, along with the question of which strategies the women’s movement, the political parties, and national and international gender equality agencies have developed in their efforts to have more women elected.

Drude Dahlerup’s *Vi har ventet længe nok – håndbog i kvinderepræsentation* (*We Have Waited Long Enough – Handbook for Women’s Representation*), Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988, is a pioneering work that had a major impact across the Nordic countries. Text 1 is an excerpt from the book’s second chapter: “Recruitment and Elections”.

Since the publication of Dahlerup’s book, Women’s representation has been a focus area of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ research programme. The most recent example is the project *Gender and Power in the Nordic Countries*, under whose auspices Drude Dahlerup has contributed a survey of theses on barriers to women’s representation. Text 2: *Women in Nordic Politics – A Continuing Success Story?*, 2011.

In the period leading up to the 2005 structural reform and merger of municipalities, which reduced the number of municipalities in Denmark from 271 to 98, the Ministry for Gender Equality requested a study of possible effects on women’s representation. The study’s results are summarised in Text 3: Ann-Dorte Christensen, *Women’s Representation in Local Politics. The Neglected Achilles’ Heel of Gender Equality in Denmark*, KVINFO, 2009.


We hope that these articles, together with the presentations in the ‘Democracy Seminar’, will help to raise important areas where Danish democracy needs to improve. We believe that it is important to be honest about strengths as well as weaknesses in the Danish democracy when we use it as a basis for inspiration to others.

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Bjørn Førde
Director
November 2013
1 Who screens women out from the political process? Voters? Parties? Women themselves?

Many party associations claim that they search high and low for female candidates, but that women decline to run for political office. However, many women report that it is extremely difficult to be included on the electoral lists, especially in a spot that would give them a real chance of being elected.

Who is responsible for the fact that women are being screened out from the pool of candidates? Is it the voters? Is it the local party associations and their male dominated nomination committees? Or is it that women don’t want to run?

Because we live in the Nordic Countries, we also have to ask the question: Who is responsible for the fact that women’s representation has increased, especially during the last 10 to 15 years?

By Drude Dahlerup

Mobilising

Many women drop out, or, rather, decide not to run, in the mobilisation phase. While women make up about half of the electorate, fewer women than men are willing to let themselves be recruited as candidates for a party at an election. The important question to answer is why this is so.

We must look for explanations in the living conditions of women: double workload and a general lack of time in exactly the years when the foundations for a political career are laid. Many women also lack sufficient self-confidence and need a push in the right direction. But we also have to ask whether the political culture, the climate, the way meetings are conducted, the time pressure and the conditions of representation can’t be improved so that more women would want to be part of the process. Other underrepresented groups in society might also benefit from such reforms.

Have there been changes in the desire and courage of women to come forward as candidates? It seems that more women are willing to hold political office now than was previously the case. Norwegian opinion polls show an increase in the share of women who are willing to let themselves be recruited from only 29 per cent in 1971 to 33 per cent (one third) in 1979 and 38 per cent in 1983. This is important because it has doubtless been a determining factor for women’s representation that fewer women than men are interested in running for political office.
The Nomination Meeting

The nomination phase is also important. At the nomination meeting or during candidate elections or primaries within the parties, the party members choose their candidates and determine their ranking on the electoral lists and who gets which districts.

In their survey of the recruitment process for municipal elections in Norway, Hellevik & Skard monitored every nomination meeting in all local party associations in the county of Akershus. They found that in some party branches, competition for a spot on the lists was fierce, especially in parties that were in a position of power and had major influence in the municipality. In other local party associations, it was difficult to get people to run. Competition at nomination meetings in those parties were for the spots on the list that would ensure that you were not elected.

When the list of candidates is being compiled, most parties strive for a certain mix of ages, representation from different districts and a certain mix of professions. They also look for personalities with the potential to make their name known and bring voter attention to the party. One problem for women has been that they were rarely considered representatives for districts, professions, etc. And the kind of personality traits the parties have looked for have often had a striking resemblance with the traits of the male role. Until 20 years ago, a party was happy if it had just one woman on the list ("The token woman").

However, this area has seen important changes. In "Blomster & Spark" (Flowers and kicks), a book of interviews with female politicians in the Nordic Countries, several women say that in some situations the fact that they were women has been an advantage to them.

"If I have to be completely honest, I think I was included during the so-called female wave – the party needed a woman placed somewhere near top of the electoral list", says Inga Lantz, Member of the Swedish Parliament.

This does not mean that women do not encounter opposition any more. Most politicians are still men. However, it means that the parties have listened to popular demands for more women in politics. This public pressure and the tenacious work of the women's organisations within the parties, actually managed to persuade the parties to recruit more women. It can be done – that is an important lesson.

In their survey, Hellevik & Skard also found that it had become a general feature of the nominations that it was considered important to secure a balanced gender distribution among the candidates. Both the nomination committees, which prepare the process, and the nomination meetings expressed this wish. However, some local party organisations were happy with having 30 per cent women on the party list, whereas others aimed for fifty per cent representation of either sex. At half of the nomination meetings in Akerhus county, it was mentioned that it had been a problem to find women who were willing to let themselves nominate, especially at a spot ranking high on the electoral lists – in other words, a spot that would make election a relative certainty. However, we do not know how persistent the search for female candidates had been. At any rate, it is no use to go around just before election time asking someone with no political experience or other organisational experience to run for office. If you do that, you are likely to get a no. Recruitment starts with smaller posts and smaller encouragements.

Why is there a lack of women, when we have just been told that there are more than enough women and men who are willing to be nominated? Hellevik & Skard’s conclusion is that it is because the potential candidates are not asked! The most important reason for this is that any party looks for candidates among its own members, but in the Nordic Countries only 10 to 20 percent of the voters are members of a political party. In addition, some of those who would be interested in taking on a political post might not be ready just now. Perhaps not until the children are older, or when, sometime in the future, there is hopefully less pressure at the job, or when their husband, sometime in the future, hopefully starts doing his share at home!
The Decoration Spot, the Competition Spot, or the Election Spot

With few exceptions, the percentage of women elected to office is lower than the percentage of women on the ballot. This means that women are being screened out during the electoral process to a larger extent than men. This could either be because of party decisions when making up the prioritised list of candidates or because of the way voters vote, or possibly a combination.

The discussion over whether the parties or the voters are responsible for the low degree of women’s representation seen in relation to the number of candidates is seemingly never ending. The way the election systems are organised plays a major role, and here is considerable variation between the Nordic Counties. One extreme is the elections to the national parliament in Finland, where voting for a candidate is mandatory and where voters chose which of the candidates on the list are elected. The other extreme is the elections for the national parliament in Norway, where voters can only vote for a party list without the possibility of choosing among the candidates on the list and thus influencing their ranking. It is the party alone that decides which of their candidates will be elected. There are many different variations on the continuum between these two extremes, and the countries usually have rules for national and local elections.

Are women really being screened out from the lists when the parties have to prioritise their candidates (where this is possible and takes place)? Several studies, including that of Hellevik & Skard, show that there are often fewer women among the high-ranking candidates on the lists – whether this happens by cumulation (the name of the candidate appears several times on lists within a district) or the candidate gets a spot near the top of a prioritized list. The spots on the lists that are likely to ensure election may be called the “election spots”. By placing a candidate here, the party gives the candidate a better chance at election than the others on the list have. The next places may be called “The competition spots”. Depending on how well the party fares in the elections, these places might result in the candidate being elected. “The decoration spots” are those that are very unlikely to lead to election.

Most often, there are more women in the competition spots and the decoration spots and fewer in the election spots. If we want increased women’s representation, it is not enough to have many women on the lists. They must also be placed in positions with a real chance of election on the lists.

Hellevik & Skard’s study shows that in some parties, the women themselves are responsible for their low ranking on the lists. In these parties, it was difficult to find women who were willing to be placed in an election spot on the list. In other parties, there was a lot of competition for the spots. Here it becomes important that incumbent candidates, those who are running for re-election, are usually accommodated first. And most politicians today are men. The incumbent’s advantage will be discussed later in this chapter.

However, there are big differences from party to party and from area to area within the same country. In some local party organisations, women are just as likely as men to take up the election spots, or at least get the same ratio of election spots to marginal spots on the party lists. A study by the Danish Equal Status Council of the elections to the Danish parliament in 1979 and 1981 concluded that female candidates on average ran under the same conditions – i.e. had the same list rankings – as men once they had managed to get a spot on the lists. However, this study, too, revealed considerable differences among the parties.

Do Voters Screen Women Out or Give Women Priority?

Do voters have a share in the responsibility for the fact that there are fewer women elected than their numbers on the party lists would indicate? Or is the determining factor the way the parties have prioritised among the candidates?

It is difficult to say. Under all circumstances, the sum of voters’ actions plays a significant role. Some voters perhaps prefer men, while others vote for women because they think there are too few women in politics. Others might not consider the gender of the candidate – at least not con-
sciously – but may be looking for a farmer, someone from the district etc. But is that usually also a man?

Hellevik & Skard found that at the 1979 Norwegian local elections, the net result of the way the voters had adjusted the electoral lists in the County of Akershus came out in favour of the female candidates. On the other hand, the net result from all of Norway was negative for the women – whether this happened consciously or because the voters preferred male candidates for other reasons.

37 percent of the Norwegian women who corrected the lists in 1983 and 14 percent of the men who corrected (a fourth of the population corrects) actually said that one of their reasons for the correction was because they wanted to promote the female candidates. Only 2 percent of the women and 2 percent of the men who corrected the lists said that their motive was to weaken the chances of female candidates. This appears from an opinion-poll conducted by Norsk Opinionsinstitut in 1983.

In Denmark, studies have shown that on average, a slightly higher number of voters choose to give their vote to female candidates than to male candidates. However, the very complicated Danish electoral system makes the net effect of voter reactions tough to elicit and difficult for voters to figure out.

The electoral system for Norwegian municipal elections and Danish parliamentary elections are probably the most complicated in the Nordic Countries. An electoral system that is transparent and easy for voters to grasp ought to be a democratic right. It must surely be a democratic right that voters can see what the results of their votes are. This is not always the case today. The following chapters will give advice on what voters can do in order to help more women to be elected.

References

Hellevik, Ottor & Torild Skard (1985), Kommunestyre – plass for kvinner? Oslo: Universitetsforlaget

The Strategies of Political Women’s Organisations

Getting more women involved in politics is an important goal for all the women’s organisations, women’s committees and equality committees of the political parties. Those women’s organisations play a crucial role in all phases of the recruitment process.

The large political women’s organisations with tens of thousands of members and with many local branches – especially prominent in Sweden and Finland – mobilise women to become active in politics through the nature of the work they do. To be active in a women’s organisation is a schooling in political work.

The women’s organisations, and the women’s committees and equality committees, use a variety of strategies in order to increase the women’s representation. For the purposes of this handbook, a survey was conducted among all the women’s organisations and committees of the political parties in the 5 Nordic Countries. Among other questions, the survey asked about the strategies they used to recruit women. This is a summary of the answers:

Strategies for the Mobilisation of Women:

→ Encourage and prompt women to run for office; find candidates.
→ Capacity building of female candidates, including courses on how to be less nice.
→ Work for reform of the way meetings are organised and when they are scheduled for, so that women, including those with children, have a real chance of participating.
Strategies During the Nomination Phase:

→ Suggest female candidates (in some parties, especially in Finland, the women's organisations always put forward their own candidates).
→ Speak in favour of female candidates during the nomination meetings and support them during internal party elections or primaries.
→ Work on getting more women on the nomination committees (In some parties, the women's organisation has a right to a seat on the nomination committee according to the statutes).

Strategies During the Election Phase:

→ Call on voters to vote for women (where it is possible to give your vote to a candidate on the list).
→ Arrange meetings, possibly cross-party, with female candidates.
→ Make sure that the female candidates are as visible during the electoral campaign as the male candidates; including meetings, the press, and election brochures.
→ Develop material to help new candidates.

General strategies

→ Work to ensure that the national party asks the local party associations to put more female candidates forward – in electable spots.
→ A general mobilization of support and resources from the party for the task of increasing women's representation. It has to be the task of the whole party.
→ Produce studies of the degree of women's representation at all levels in the party.
→ Produce brochures and folders about why it is important to have more women in political life.

"We have to say it again and again", the women's organisations say. "We have to keep the pressure up constantly". Or as one of the organisations says: "We put women forward, we make a fuss and we support women!".

In the interview book "Blomster & Spark", Karin Andersson tells about her work as national secretary of the Women's Organisation of the liberal Swedish Centre Party from 1965 to 1979.

"In my days, we worked very hard within the women's organisation in order to increase the representation of women. We trained women in political issues, but most of all we trained them to present themselves and be part of the political game. Furthermore we tried to influence the nomination process in a tactical way – even though one really oughtn't to do that".

It is a general experience that it is normally too late to start the process when you are coming up on election time. The nomination process within the parties is crucial for women's representation. Therefore, campaigns have to take place between elections, usually from 1 to 1½ years before election Day.

The Most Successful Strategies

The survey also asked women's organisations within the political parties to assess which tools they consider to have been the most effective to increase women's representation within their own party. Here is a sample of the very different answers:

"Continual pressure"
"Objectivity"
"That there are already women who favour gender equality on the boards of the local party associations"
"Capacity building of candidates"
“Personal contact with decision makers”

“The most successful has been to launch women; to make the invisible visible”

“Recommendation of gender quotas and the fact that we in the women’s organisation (and others in the party as well) keep stressing how important it is that women are part of the process”

“1. Decisions in the party’s governing bodies. 2. Making women aware of the issues”

“Identifying female candidates. The best results are when women at the nomination meetings are really determined that women must be included”

“No success. Our party has no female MP’s!”

Finally, gender quotas are mentioned as the most successful tool by those parties that have introduced this more radical approach. Other parties mention passing new rules that men and women must alternate on election lists. This is, of course, only a success if the party manages to have more than one candidate elected from each constituency. Otherwise, even this way of organising the list could result in an all-male group, if the men are everywhere first on the list.

Action by women across party lines has also been used as a strategy. Throughout the twentieth century, women’s organisations worked together to improve women’s representation. In later years, there are new examples of cross-party actions by women, some of them as joint ventures with the respective Equal Status Councils.

“We Can Do It If We Want To, and We Want To”

The Women’s Organisation of Folkpartiet (People’s Party, a Swedish liberal party) has published a 5 page orange brochure with advice on what women in different parts of the party organisation could do to help more women run and get elected for the national parliament, the county councils and the municipal councils.

1. Check the membership database of the women’s association and of the party to identify women who could be potential candidates for Parliament, county councils and municipal councils. Ask them if they want to run.

2. Make sure that female candidates write letters to the editor in local newspapers and articles in the internal party publications. They must be seen and heard at meetings both in the local party organisations and on the county level. Support women by repeatedly referring to what they did and said at internal party functions. Tell party friends how capable those women are. Also, make sure to encourage the women – stress how important it is that they are running.

3. In the fall, one year before the elections, it is time for nominations (some local branches hold nominations early in the spring). Individuals, groups, committees and the local branches of the women’s organisation can suggest names for the national parliament and the municipal councils. The best approach is for the women’s organisation to agree on which candidates to support – both for the national parliament and county and municipal councils. This gives more weight to the proposed candidates, and all the members of the women’s organisation would then vote for the same people during the internal party election. This can be a determining factor in the final result.

4. Get in contact with the chairs of the county and local party associations. Ask her or him to make sure that party leaders ask the election committee to take women’s representation into account when they make their recommendation for the list of candidates.

5. Present the candidates of the women’s organisation orally to the members of the election committee. Talk to them about the importance of women’s representation. Recommend the candidates and do not shy away from highlighting their qualities and qualifications.

6. Speak with individual party members about how few women hold elected office and how that must be changed in the elections.

7. At internal elections in the party, make sure that all members of the women’s organisation actually participate and vote for the organisation’s candidates. Remember that only
party members can vote. The internal party elections are crucial. Therefore, it is important that the women’s organisation has marketed its candidates in different ways, as mentioned in item 2.

8. The election committee starts its work. Call the committee and stress how important it is that the 40-60 rule is taken into account – also at spots that are likely to lead to election… Also refer to calls by the party leadership at the national level (to put forward more female candidates).

9. Late in the autumn the year preceding the elections there are meetings in the local party association and in the county associations to determine the make-up of the party lists. Make sure that all members of the women’s organisations and others who support the female candidates are present. Stand up – the more the better – to recommend the women again and again. Don’t be afraid to say what strong candidates they are, and how important it is that there be women in spots that can lead to them actually being elected. Much is gained if an “important” member of the party – preferably a man – would speak in favour of the female candidates and of women’s representation.

So now the lists have been compiled and if all goes well there will be more women in “electable spots” than in previous years. Perhaps there is even a woman in the top spot.

A piece of good advice is to work together with the youth organisation of the party. Perhaps you could use the principle of give-and-take in relation to the candidates.

It is often not easy to promote a (female) candidate and “make a fuss” about the low representation of women in election spots. Therefore, you should make sure to arrange frequent meetings in the framework of the women’s organisation where women can meet under simple and open forms – SISTERHOOD BREEDS SELF CONFIDENCE

The Folkpartiet’s Women’s Organisation has around 5,000 members.

Courses on How to Be Less Nice

The women’s organisation of the Moderate Party has created a program for the training of female candidates. The aim is to give their members the skillset needed to take on political posts. The courses take place between elections. The local branches of the women’s organisation appoint one or a couple of women whom they want to promote. During regional and national conferences the women are trained in tactics, technique and politics; and the barriers that women encounter in political life are discussed in detail. The courses began in 1976.

In the beginning, there was some sceptical reactions within the party: “Why hold special candidate training courses for women?” Today the courses on how to be less nice are an established institution within the party.

The Women’s Organisation of the Moderate Party has around 67,000 members.

Analyse the Recruitment for Your Own Organisations

It is important to establish where the barriers for women are – whether it is about recruitment for an elected body or for a position of trust in an organisation. It is easier to target the action if one knows where, how, and why women are being screened out.

For this reason, every party, trade union or any other kind of association would benefit from analysing the way recruitment is done. For women, the time is past when we just demanded “more women in politics” or “more women on the executive committee” and then appealed to the men to do something about it – or ignore the demand.
An analysis of how to increase women’s representation in an organisation could include the following steps:

1. Collect statistical data on the percentage of women among the membership and those elected at all levels; the latest party congress, the executive committee, the staff — and do this both on the central level and in the local branches.

2. Study how the female members view the work in the organisation and which barriers they see, either through a questionnaire or by talking to large numbers of members. Compare this with information about the living conditions of female members. The clash between the living conditions, including the responsibility for the family, and the way the organisation functions, the meeting times and workload for elected representatives can lead to proposals for changes to the way the organisation operates.

3. Analyse the recruitment. Find out how, when, and by whom candidates, party leadership and trade union representatives are elected. What qualifications are crucial and who decides what is considered “qualifications”. How may greater emphasis be placed on the qualifications and experiences of women – both by the men and by the women themselves. No one starts out as Prime Minister or head of a trade union! Study the routes of recruitment within the organisation, party or trade union. This can be done by looking into the backgrounds of the present leaders. This way, it becomes apparent which kind of posts and tasks seem to lead to positions with an increased level of responsibility. Therefore, make sure that women are also part of the tasks that give the necessary qualifications – or try to change the routes to recruitment so that the tasks that women do in the organisation are considered equally important when electing the party leadership and trade union representatives. By the way, who decides who is “young and promising”? Women often lack mentors. Identify the informal power structure, and find out where decisions are actually being made. Remember that most things have been decided before the meeting that elects new candidates.

4. Develop a strategy for how women can support each other within the organisation. To be underrepresented is often a vicious circle: When there are few women in the governing bodies, few women are recruited. On the other hand, having more women elected might lead to a self-accelerating positive effect if these women consciously recruit and support other women.

5. Make sure that the organisation allocates the necessary resources (money, secretary et cetera) and support for the survey.

Tips on Improving Women’s Representation

“A democratic decision-making process requires that the knowledge and experience of both men and women are included. It is therefore important that more women are represented in the governing bodies in order to enable them to influence the work within the trade union”. This was the wording of a study of women’s representation within the Central Organisation of Professionals, TCO in Sweden. TCO unites 19 trade unions with a total of one million members, of which 60 percent are women. However, women are underrepresented in the governing bodies, congresses, national executive committee and the district boards. In Denmark, the equivalent of TCO is FTF – the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark.

The low degree of women’s representation is a common problem for the labour movement, the political parties and many other organisations. Within the labour movement, efforts to change the situation have been initiated and women’s representation is slowly increasing. However, it does not happen automatically. Here are the tips from the TCO-study about what concrete steps might be taken to remedy the situation:

In Terms of Internal Representation

→ Provide targeted training for the underrepresented gender (most often women).
→ Fill vacant posts with candidates of the underrepresented gender.
→ Produce statistics on gender balance at each new nomination.
→ Ask those who nominate candidates to do so in a way that ensures that the gender balance becomes more proportionate.
→ Run gender equality campaigns to accompany the nomination of candidates
→ Try to increase the number of seats on boards reserved for the underrepresented gender.
→ Put forward proposals for nominations that reflect the gender-distribution among the membership.
→ Change election rules to include provisions on a proportional representation of the sexes.
→ Limit the number of posts that a single person may hold.
→ Test new ways of conducting meetings.

In Terms of **External Representation**

→ Compile gender balance statistics each time a representative is appointed for an external body.
→ Recommend that those who nominate candidates strive towards the goal of full proportionality.
→ Limit the number of times persons who hold many positions may be re-nominated.
Women in Nordic politics.
A continuing success story?

In recent years we have been celebrating the centenaries of women’s suffrage in the various Nordic countries. This has prompted us to reflect on where we stand today from a global perspective. The Nordic countries have, for a long time, been world famous for their relatively high proportions of women in politics. But people in other parts of the world often ask us how many years it actually took the Nordic countries to achieve such high levels of female representation.

By Drude Dahlerup

1. Introduction

It is precisely the instances of the many 100-year jubilees that force us to admit, as an answer to the above question, that it took us each about a century to reach the current level of between 38 and 47 per cent of female representatives in the parliaments and between 32 and 42 per cent in the local councils in the Nordic countries. Today there is, however, great impatience all over the world in respect of the under-representation of women. On an average, men have 81 per cent of the places in the world’s parliaments, and women only 19 per cent (www.ipu.org).

Not least after the adoption of the UN Platform for Action at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, it is obvious that many of the new democracies in the world are not prepared to wait as long as 100 years to achieve gender balance within their political systems. Today the Nordic region, with its “step-by-step” model, is no longer the only possible alternative for the development of women’s representation in politics.

Two features have, for a long time, characterised the development of women’s representation in politics in the Nordic countries. Firstly, the Nordic countries have had absolutely the highest female representation in the world, which has made waves globally. The Nordic region has for a long time had a positive reputation in the world when it comes to gender equality.

Secondly, since World War II we have experienced a consistent increase in the female proportional numbers among the members of the political assemblies. This has been described as a continuous and advancing process (Christensen & Damkjær 1998). This success story has contributed to the notion that gender balance in politics, perhaps even equality between men and women in general, will “come in due time”. Is it not part of our faith since childhood that gender equality is advancing? The official gender equality policy has thus also been built on such optimism.

The Norwegian researchers Hege Skjeie and Mari Teigen speak of the “travel metaphor” in the notion of gender equality in the Nordic countries – we are on our way forward (2003). In this article these two characteristic features will be explored in more detail. Firstly, the developments in the Nordic countries are analysed from a global perspective. Why is the leading position of the Nordic region in terms of gender equality about to disappear? Secondly, the discussion will focus on how we should interpret the historical development of women’s representation in the
Nordic countries: Can we expect a continually increasing female representation? Is there an invisible glass ceiling?

It will also be discussed why at present there is such a large difference between the Nordic countries in, for example, the use of quota systems. The third part of the article will focus on this empirical development in relation to four partly contradictory theories on the development of women’s representation: According to the *theory of patriarchy*, the male dominated society reproduces itself continuously, and when women finally get access to an institution, the power evaporates. An opposing approach to this is the *time lag theory*, which gives a more positive picture, according to which women will slowly but surely be integrated into the power elite. The *saturation thesis*, for its part, says that there will be certain weariness before gender equality is fully achieved, which kicks in at about the level of 30 per cent. Lastly, the *significance of public debate and pressure from women’s movements* will be discussed.

2. The Nordic countries are about to lose the leader shirt

For a very long period the Nordic countries, together with the Netherlands, were alone at the top of the ranking list of women’s representation in various countries. First, Finland was number one, then Norway and finally Sweden. Today, the Nordic countries are about to be caught up by a number of other countries, when it comes to women’s representation in their political assemblies. The Nordic leading position is challenged by other European countries, but mainly by countries from the global South.

This is a new and, in many ways, positive development. Table 1 shows that today, Rwanda is the leading country on the world ranking list. Generally, the increasing trend globally is modest. Ten years ago, the global average was 13 per cent; today it is 19 per cent. This can be seen as proof of progress. But is can also be regarded as an illustration of how very slow progress is. However, elections take place at certain intervals. If we look only at the countries with the most recent elections, a somewhat better development is discerned. At the same time, the differences between the regions of the world are about to be leveled ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)).

Three interesting perspectives can be seen in Table 1 (next page). First of all, the table shows that not only Rwanda, but also other countries from the global South, i.e. Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa, now have a female representation of over 30 per cent in their parliaments, thus challenging the Nordic countries. Secondly, the table shows that most of the countries at the top have an electoral system based on proportional representation (PR). Thirdly, the table shows that several of the top countries use some types of quota systems.

A country indicated as having a quota law means that the quota rules are included in the constitution or electoral law or party law. Voluntary candidate quotas, on the other hand, mean that individual parties themselves have introduced quotas for their own candidate lists at elections. Research into quotas has shown that voluntary party quotas have typically been started by parties in the centre or to the left of the political spectrum, possibly with a contagious effect on other parties. In a number of cases, certain parties have introduced voluntary quotas, but later the quota system has been introduced through legislation for all parties; this has happened in, for example, Belgium and recently also in Spain and Portugal (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2008; EUPARL 2008).

2.1 Quotas – a global trend

Today, it is impossible to talk about development of women’s representation in politics without involving the issue of quotas. Gender quotas is a new, exciting field of research, since quotas are associated with so many central areas of democracy theory and feminist theory. Empirical quota research has explored a number of themes – for example, the geographical diffusion of quotas and the various quota discourses in different parts of the world. The significance of various types of quota systems has been analysed, and studies have been conducted into the often troublesome implementation of quotas and on the impact of quotas in both quantitative (that is, numbers of nominated and elected women) and qualitative (i.e. in relation to the issue of wom-

Electoral system: PR: Proportional representation including party lists with multiple candidates. Mix: Mix of proportional representation and single-mandate constituencies. FPTP, first past the post: Single-mandate constituencies in which each party only nominates one candidate, and where the candidate receiving the majority of the votes wins the constituency.

Quota types: Legal quotas are included in the constitution or a law, typically an electoral law or a party law. Party quotas: Voluntary quota system passed by the party itself, e.g. a minimum of 40 per cent on that party’s list of candidates must be women. A country is listed as having party quotas if only one party represented in Parliament has quotas. While many quota systems target the proportion of women/both genders on the parties’ lists of candidates at elections, the so-called reserved seats quotas which are always legally regulated reserve a number of seats for women. At local elections in India, for instance, a third of the elected candidates must be women. In Rwanda, two women must be elected for each polling district (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2009).

Sources: Interparliamentary Union (2009) www.ipu.org; International IDEA and Stockholm University (2009) www.quotaproject.org; official election statistics. The numbers indicate the proportion of women on Election Day. Some variation may occur compared to www.ipu.org, the latter including certain substitutions between elections.
The use of gender quotas within politics has spread like wildfire over all the continents in the last decade. Even if quota regulations are often controversial, it is precisely this method that has spread – as a means to swiftly change an unwanted under-representation of women in public assemblies. Presently, quotas are used in about half of all the countries in the world, if we combine the approximately 50 countries where quotas have been introduced through legislation and/or a change of the constitution, and the approximately 50 other countries where parties represented in parliament have voluntarily implemented quotas for their own lists of candidates. This is a surprising development in view of how controversial quotas are as an instrument of gender equality policy (Dahlerup 2006; EUPARL 2008; see also the global overview on www.quotaproject.org).  

2.2 New explanations

The increasing use of gender quotas in politics challenge the prevalent theories as to why some countries are at the top when it comes to women’s representation. Differences in socio-economic development have previously explained most variations in women’s political representation, although the colour of governments and the contributions of various actors – not least the strategies and strength of women’s movements – have been important as supplements to the structural explanatory factors. The nature of each electoral system is an additional important factor for the variations in the proportions of women. While female representation amounted to an average of 20 per cent in countries with proportional representation, it was only 11 per cent in countries with plurality/majority elections, such as the British electoral system, and, finally 14 per cent in countries with mixed electoral systems (Norris 2006). However, the influence of the electoral system seems to be smaller in non-Western countries than it is in Western countries (Norris 2004).

Since it is difficult to construct a quota system that suits elections in first-past-the-post systems (FPTP) – how can a requirement of 30 or 40 per cent female candidates work, when the parties only nominate one candidate in each constituency? – the differences between female representation in the two electoral systems will probably increase in future.  

Research has shown that while three quarters of the countries with proportional elections have quota systems, there are quotas only in one third of those countries that have plurality/majority systems (FPTP) constituencies represented by one person (Dahlerup 2007b). It would be a mistake to assume that quotas solve all the problems that women encounter in politics. Quota systems are not a miracle solution and cannot be used alone as a measure for gender equality. It should also be noted that from a global perspective, high female representation has also been achieved without quotas, as can be seen in the cases of Finland and Denmark in Table 1. It is important to underline that many different types of quota systems are used around the world. Research on quotas has shown that quotas can remain a purely symbolic gesture, unless the chosen type of quota system matches the electoral system of the country. On the other hand, quota systems have, given certain conditions, resulted in historical leaps in women’s representation, as when Cost Rica moved from 19 to 35 per cent of women in parliament in one single election in 2002, after the introduction of quotas through legislation.

Several circumstances must be in place in order for a quota system to have the desired effects: 1) the type of quota system introduced matches the electoral system, 2) the system includes rules on the gendered ranking order of the lists (a requirement of 40 per cent women on the candidate lists does not result in more women being elected, if they are all placed at the end of the list!), and 3) sanctions in case of non-compliance with the quota rules. Legal sanctions are,

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1 In a co-operation between International IDEA and Stockholm University through Drude Dahlerup & Lenita Freidenvall a global website has been created, where the various quota systems in the many countries with quotas are listed (www.quotaproject.org).

2 There are, however, examples of quota systems which work in plurality/majority electoral systems, for example, the Scottish Labour Party’s twinning-system, where two constituencies together were obliged to nominate a man and a woman, or the local elections in India, where the places reserved for female candidates rotate between the constituencies from one election to the next.
naturally, restricted to quota systems regulated by law. But a party with voluntary quotas can put pressure on its local organisations, which, in most cases, are those who decide on the nominations. Quotas regulated by law or the constitution is the main form of the quota systems in Latin America, but it has now also reached Europe, where gender quotas for electoral lists have been introduced by law in Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal and several countries in the Balkan region (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2008; EUPARL 2008).

The development has been particularly pronounced in a large numbers of post-conflict countries. In most countries today, there is an attempt to actively involve women in the efforts to further national reconciliation after catastrophes such as genocide or civil war. In Rwanda, number one on the global ranking list, various women’s organisations were active in the process of developing the constitution, and quota rules were included in the new constitution. International organisations have contributed, in Rwanda as in a number of other countries, to creating a pressure on political leaders for increased inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups. But without the local women’s organisations’ active work and mobilisation of women, no long-term changes will be the result. In countries such as Uganda and South Africa, there has also been some success in the attempts to include women in the reorganisation of the country (Tripp, Dior & Lowe-Morna 2006). The international community has strongly supported this development. The requirements for affirmative action and active measures included in the CEDAW Convention and the Platform for Action from the Beijing conference have contributed to giving increased legitimacy to the claims of national women’s organizations for gender balance in politics (Krook 2004; Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2005).

There is, however, also much discussion about the issue of what many see as an inclusion of women “from above”, that is, without sufficient mobilisation of women to create a permanent change. The quota systems in Afghanistan and Iraq are such controversial examples. Generally gender quotas are today used in elections in all types of political systems: democratic, semi-democratic as well as non-democratic (Dahlerup 2007b).

In the Nordic countries, we have never experienced such quick leaps of between 10 and 20 per cent units in women’s representation. The largest jump has been one of between 8 and 9, but usually the increases have been between 2 and 3 per cent units; a gradual, step-by-step-development which is typically Nordic. But while the proportions of women in the Finnish and Icelandic parliaments leapt upwards in the latest elections, both Denmark and the Netherlands – which can both be described as “glass ceiling countries” are steadily moving down on the global ranking list. Ten years ago Denmark was number two on the ranking list, today it holds the tenth place, see Table 1. The fact that the Nordic region is no longer alone at the top, and that some of the Nordic countries are about to be overtaken by a number of developing countries, is extremely interesting. This represents a challenge to our self-image in the Nordic countries.

3. A steadily progressive development?

The actual political development in the Nordic popularly elected assemblies has strongly contributed to the formation of a narrative about the Nordic region as a group of countries steadily progressing towards gender equality. Since World War II, continuous advancement in female representation has been the normal situation in the Nordic countries. Not least when it comes to female representation in politics, the Nordic region has become world famous in circles interested in gender equality.

Table 2 (next page) shows the development of female representation in the Nordic parliaments. The table as such illustrates the perception of a steadily progressing – perhaps irreversible? – development in the form of achievements reached in the course of history. The table shows how slowly things happened in the beginning, after women had gained the right to vote. Only Finland from the very beginning reached 10 per cent of women in parliament, while women’s representation in the other Nordic countries remained at 2–4 per cent throughout the inter-war period. Denmark experienced a historical low point in the 1943 election, when only two women (1 %) were elected into the Danish Folketing. Only in the 1970s did the development actually gain momentum in the Nordic parliaments, with the exception of Iceland, which lagged somewhat
behind the other four countries. It was also in the 1970s that the great breakthrough for women’s representation happened in Nordic local politics generally. After this, there was a constant increase in female representation in local governments simultaneously in all Nordic countries. However, Iceland has always lagged a little behind in its development, only reaching a breakthrough in the 1980s. On the other hand, Iceland broke another barrier with the establishment of the feminist political party the Women’s List, which in the early 1980s strongly contributed to a permanent change in the so far very male-dominated political life of Iceland, and in more or less all political parties. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there was a steady and considerable increase in the proportion of women in the Nordic parliaments, which contributed to the Nordic region’s international reputation as the most gender equal group of countries in the world.

### Table 2 Gradual development in the Nordic parliaments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st election</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st election over 10 %</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st election over 40 %</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female repr. in last election</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>42 %</td>
<td>43 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest female repr.</td>
<td>38 %</td>
<td>42 %</td>
<td>43 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First female prime minister</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First female president</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Official election statistics from the five countries. From Raam 1999:32. Updated. NA = not applicable. Danish numbers based on 179 MPs, i.e. including the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Only lower chamber.

Today, however, we cannot count on a continuous increase in women’s representation, and in some Nordic elections we have even seen a decrease. The numbers showing the highest proportion of women ever in Table 2 have in the last few years not always been the figures from the most recent election. However, with the latest increase in female representation in Finland and Iceland, the highest numbers shown here are from the latest election. But generally it is a new phenomenon in the postwar history of the Nordic countries, that it cannot be expected that the female representation will always increase in each individual election.

At the same time, the debate has developed in different directions in the Nordic countries, and the pressures put on the parties vary. When the women’s representation in the Swedish Riksdagen decreased in 1991 for the first time in decades, a great debate ensued, and the network Stödstrumporna (The Support Stockings) threatened to establish a Women’s Party, unless the political parties would nominate more women for the next election – which they did. Although the decrease in 1991 was primarily caused by the right-wing party Ny Demokrati (New Democracy) entering the parliament with only three women out of 25 places, the 1991 election gave rise to debate, activism and pressure groups (Freidenvall 2006). In Denmark, for its part, women’s representation has remained unchanged in recent elections without this attracting any attention outside of the women’s movements – except very recently.
In many other areas of society the Nordic countries are not a leading region internationally; for example, when it comes to the proportions of women in managerial positions in the corporate sector, or the numbers of female professors. The Nordic countries score under the EU average in terms of women in leading positions. Furthermore, the Nordic countries display some of the largest differences between the proportion of women on the labour market and the proportion of women in leading positions, that is, a difference of 20 and 30 per cent units, which is a significant imbalance (European Commission 2008:35). The perception in Sweden is that their country is the “most gender equal country in the world”. But presently, for example, The UNDP gender-related development index has Norway in first place (2009).

3.1 The responsibility of the political parties

It is interesting that for a long time female representation developed in parallel in all the Nordic countries, despite there being great differences between the countries when it comes to the voters’ opportunities to influence which candidates are actually elected. The extreme ends of this spectrum of difference are on the one hand the compulsory preferential voting systems in Finland and on the other the situation at parliamentary elections in Norway, where voters can only choose between parties (closed lists). There is no agreement within research as to what the significance of the personal voting has for the development of women’s representation. The answer is complicated by the fact that the net effect of the voters’ choices varies from party to party, but also depending on the current the debate. A lively debate on the under-representation of women can result in many personal votes for women candidates in the next election, which, in turn, affects the nominations of the parties. It is a widespread notion that it is the voters who decide which persons get elected. However, this is actually not true. There is agreement within election research that in most political systems, including those in the Nordic countries, it is the political parties that are the actual “gatekeepers” to membership of local councils or parliament. This pertains both to closed and open lists electoral systems. The reason is that it is the political parties that have the monopoly on nominating the candidates to be presented to the voters. It is the parties that decide whether a candidate be nominated in a constituency where the party has relatively safe seat, or in one where the party traditionally has a weak position. Furthermore, it is the parties that decide the placement of the candidates on the lists. Norwegian researchers have coined the concepts “election places” (for certain winners), “competition places” (for those that may be elected, if the party improves its share of the vote) and “decoration places” (those expected to lose) (Hellevik & Skard 1985). The likelihood of being elected is, naturally, greatest for those who have the election places (the safe seats), followed by the competition places; generally speaking, being an old hand, which is to say, running for re-election is also an advantage (known as the incumbency factor).

The Danish Equal Status Council (Ligestillingsrådet), now dissolved, for many years wrote in its annual report as an explanation of the increasing proportion of women that “the voters’ inclination to vote for a woman has increased” (Ligestillingsrådets årsberetning 1987:144). However, the Council had no basis for this conclusion, since it would require detailed analyses of changes over time in the placement of women on the lists, combined with analyses of the effects of the voters’ choice of individual candidates. In general, the party’s ranking order is only seldom changed by the voters. It is therefore always best to be placed at the top of the list. Thus, when discussing women’s representation, the focus must be on the recruitment practices of the political parties. The parties’ actions are decisive, and they, for their part, act according to expectations of how the voters react to the composition of lists in various historical periods. Generally, the curves for the female proportion of the nominated candidates and of the elected ones develop in parallel to each other.

3 Managerial positions: ISCO categories 121 (directors and chief executives) and 13 (managers of smaller enterprises).
3.2 The use of quotas in Nordic politics

In the Nordic countries quotas are used for the popularly elected assemblies only in the form of voluntary quotas among candidates, not in the form of legislation. It was the parties on the left of the political spectrum that were the first to introduce voluntary party quotas: the Green parties, the socialist parties and the social democrats, and the centre party, Venstre, in Norway (Dahlerup 1988). There is, however, considerable variation between the five Nordic countries. In Sweden, most political parties today follow the principle of “varannan damernas” (every second a woman), according to which female and male candidates are nominated alternately on the parties’ electoral lists; but formal, written quota rules exist only in the red and green parties (Freidenvall 2006). In Iceland voluntary quotas are used for the candidate lists by two parties, in Norway by five parties (40 %, Labour 50 %). No parties in Finland formally use quotas, but many do so in practice. In Denmark, the Socialist People’s Party had gender quotas for their parliamentary candidate lists for a few years, and this party and the social democrats used quotas for the election to the EU Parliament during a short period, but that quotas were later abandoned in the name of ‘gender equality’ (Borchorst & Christensen 2003). From a global perspective, it is very unusual that quota rules are withdrawn once they have been implemented. Many, nevertheless, hope that quotas are a temporary instrument, which at some point in future will no longer be needed.

Not least in Norway and Sweden the voluntary quota rules of the political parties have had a considerable influence on the proportions of nominated and elected women (Freidenvall et al. 2006, table 3.2, pp 71–72). While many countries in the global South have introduced gender quotas in order to increase women’s representation above the first 10–15 per cent, voluntary party quotas were implemented in the Nordic countries only after women’s representation had reached a high level of 20–30 per cent. For several decades after women’s suffrage, the step-by-step model was prevalent in the Nordic countries, and still is in many areas, as opposed to what has been called fast track policies, where pro-active gender equality measures are used to enable historical leaps in women’s representation (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2005). However, Table 3 shows that quotas are not unknown in Nordic politics, not even those regulated by law.

| Table 3 The use of gender quotas in Nordic politics |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Since the 1980s                  | Denmark       | Finland       | Iceland       | Norway        | Sweden        |
| Legislation on gender balance in | Yes           | Yes           | Yes           | Yes           | Recom.        |
| public councils, committees and  |               |               |               |               |               |
| boards                           |               |               |               |               |               |
| Since the 1980-1990s             | No            | No            | Yes           | Yes           | Yes           |
| Party candidate lists (voluntary |               |               |               |               |               |
| quotas)                         |               |               |               |               |               |
| 1990s                           | No            | Yes           | No            | Yes           | No            |
| Municipal quotas (leadership and |               |               |               |               |               |
| committees)                     |               |               |               |               |               |
| 2000s                           | No            | No            | Yes           | Yes           | No            |
| Quotas on the boards of public   |               |               |               |               |               |
| and private joint-stock companies|               |               |               |               |               |

As Table 3 shows, Norway is the “quota country” in the Nordic region. It is also the one of all the Nordic countries where quotas have met with least opposition. Denmark has made least use of quotas. In Sweden quota systems are extremely controversial and trigger much debate and many emotions, but are, nevertheless, used in certain areas.
3.3 Leadership positions

A member of the Danish parliament has said: “It was in the air back in the 1950s, that the women in Folketinget should not expect to get any of the leading posts in parliament”. This situation has changed markedly. Today the Nordic female members of parliament hold more or less a proportion of leading positions in the parliaments which mirrors the proportion of female members as a whole; see the country reports (vertical gendering). Many other countries in the world have perhaps increased their proportion of women in politics, but female politicians have only a small share of the leading posts as, for example, committee chairs or speaker of the house. However, in the Nordic countries there is still a horizontally gendered division of labour within politics; but, apart from the most prestigious posts, this present division in the Nordic region can most likely not be said to represent anything else than the personal priorities of the male and female politicians (Refsgaard 1990; Wångnerud 1998; 2000). It is, nevertheless, important to specify that numerical female representation is not identical with influence and power. A totally different set on analytical tools is needed to study this.

Some might perhaps claim that simply since women’s representation is so high in the Nordic countries today, it is impossible to count on a continued constant increase. But how should this be understood? Firstly, several areas in some of the Nordic countries are far from a 50 per cent gender balance. Secondly, it must be asked whether there is a new boundary at 50 per cent? Despite men having held 100, 90 and 80 per cent of all places for so long, 50 per cent for women is perceived as a kind of upper limit – or is it? The concept of “gender balance” indicates this as the final target.

The assemblies furthest from the 50 per cent target are the Danish local councils with 32 per cent women, that is, as much as 18 per cent units away from a gender balance, if this is defined as 50-50. The highest proportion of women is found in the Finnish government with 60 per cent women (+10). None of the Nordic parliaments have ever, as has Rwanda, passed the 50 per cent limit, but the Swedish Riksdagen comes closest to a gender balance with 47 per cent female members. But in some areas the development seems to have come to a halt, and the constant increase of female representation so far has stagnated.

3.4 The glass ceiling

The glass ceiling is a metaphor for, or image of, the invisible mechanisms that seem to hamper the advancement of women within politics, business, academia, etc. According to the Danish power study *Magtudredningen*, there were altogether only 12 per cent women in the entire elite in Denmark, and according to the corresponding Swedish study *Maktens kön* (The Gender of Power) the proportion of women in the power elite in Sweden increased from 13 per cent in 1989 to 26 per cent in 2001 (Christiansen et al. 2002; Göransson 2007). The greatest progress has taken place within politics, not least after the take off phase in the 1970s.

But within political life there seems to be a stagnation of the development in certain areas. Among the Nordic countries, this pertains particularly to Denmark. Up to the latest election it seemed as if Finland and Iceland, too, had turned into “glass ceiling countries” with a stagnation of female representation, but both countries have recently experienced a considerable increase in the proportion of women in politics. This proves that glass ceilings can indeed be broken! In Denmark women’s representation has been unchanged at a level of 37–38 per cent in the last four parliamentary elections, and at 28, 27, 27 and 27 per cent in the last four municipal elections, 1993-2005, until the most recent local election of 2009 in which the percentage finally increased somewhat, to 32 per cent. After a merger of municipalities to larger units, the proportion of female mayors in Denmark fell as low as 9 per cent. At the same time, female representation in the last two elections to the now abolished county councils (amtsråd) in Denmark fell from 31 to 29 and finally to 27 per cent. The proportion of women in the election to the new Regional Councils nevertheless amounted to 34 per cent; but then, too, the risk for a decrease because

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4 Said by Grethe Philip, member of parliament for the social-liberal party *Det radikale Venstre* (personal communication)
of the larger units was also publicly debated. In a comparison of regional elections in the EU/EEA countries, Denmark is only just over the median (European Commission 2008). The question is whether such a stagnation should only be seen as a temporary mitigation, or as a sign of the activation of the attitude “this far – but no further”.

A Nordic comparison is important for the understanding of the character of the stagnation. Denmark holds the lowest Nordic record, when it comes to the proportion of women on municipal councils, since Iceland, which tends to have the lowest level, has now overtaken Denmark. The lack of debate about the problem is without doubt an important factor explaining the stagnation. In Denmark there has been relatively little discussion on the low percentage of women, and only in connection with the celebration of 100 years of women’s right to vote in the municipal elections, introduced in 1908, has a debate started on the low and stagnating female proportion in Danish local elections (www.kvinfo.dk). In Sweden, too, the proportion of women stagnated in the last local elections, but at a far higher level than in Denmark: 42 per cent. Looking at the parallel historical development in the Nordic countries after World War II, a difference of 10-15 per cent between Denmark and Sweden in this area must be taken as an abyss.

However, Denmark is not alone in being stuck at around 30 per cent. This is the case also in the Netherlands. In the past both of these countries were in the world’s absolute super league, but today they have gone down to 10th and 13th place respectively; see Table 1. In the Netherlands, too, the question is presently asked as to why a stagnation has taken place (Leyenaar 2007). But what is a glass ceiling actually? The glass ceiling concept is used to describe invisible, structural barriers (non-legislative), which hamper the careers of women. In their attempts to advance and gain real influence, the women come up against an invisible ceiling. The glass ceiling is a metaphor for structural barriers or, in other words, structural discrimination. Even though the concept of a glass ceiling is primarily used in regard to career opportunities in the labour market, it is also used concerning political representation.

But the glass ceiling, as such, is not an explanation. It does not say anything about which mechanisms can be assumed to lie behind it, nor what or who is doing the hampering, nor how a glass ceiling can be broken. We must therefore dig a bit deeper. Within Nordic research on women in politics, there are several opposing theories when it comes to explaining the variations in the female political representation. Below I will discuss four such theories (Dahlerup 2009).

4 Theories on women’s representation

4.1 Theory of patriarchy

The glass ceiling approach is often connected with a notion that it is true that women in the Nordic countries have entered politics, but when they start coming close to power, they encounter an attitude of “this far, but no further”. The hypothesis is that men maintain their superior power over society through various mechanisms. Already when the proportion of women reaches 30 per cent, there are comments to the effect that “now women must not start dominating”. This perspective claims that men as a group maintain their hold on power because the institutions into which women have entered thereby lose their power (enter women – exit power). In a slightly different version it is claimed that women only manage to enter institutions which are about to lose their power (exit power – enter women). In the research both these versions are called the theory of shrinking institutions. It is, however, difficult to test these theories empirically, partly because they are often quite vague. Was the power of the Folketinget already diminishing or did it diminish when the proportion of women started to grow rapidly in the 1970s? Diminishing in relation to what? Is it, in that case, explained by the increasing proportion of women? Is the question of minority versus majority governments not more decisive than the proportion of women for the power of parliament?

This tradition also uses the concept of the law of increasing disproportionality, according to which the proportion of women decreases progressively the higher up in the hierarchy we look. There is also a great deal of statistical evidence to confirm that the proportion of men generally
increases the higher we come in the hierarchy. The law of increasing disproportionality within politics in the Nordic countries is often ascribed to the book *Unfinished Democracy. Women in Nordic Politics* (Haavio-Mannila et al. 1983, in English 1985). Although the power perspective undoubtedly dominated this first co-Nordic book on women in politics, it also pointed out that there were exceptions already in the early 1980s, particularly when looking at politics within the individual sectors, e.g. the social sector versus the financial sector. Tine Kjær Bach gives these thoughts the joint name of the marginalisation hypothesis (2005). The hypothesis was dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, but is still heard today in the public debate. These theories are related to the more general theories on patriarchy and as it is called in Sweden, the gender power regime (‘könsmaktsordningen’ or ‘genussystemet’), which emphasize women’s structural subordination. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s the progress of women was often interpreted within such a framework. "This only happens because..." These theories were criticised for being without nuance and too static; a criticism which the historian Yvonne Hirdman, mother of the concept “gender system”, has already responded to in the title of her book published in 2001: *Genus – om det stabilas föränderliga former* (Gender – On the Changeability of the Stable Form).

If one uses a purely nominal definition of a patriarchy or male dominated society as a society where men hold the majority of all the leading positions in the fields of economy, politics, religion and social organisations, all societies known so far must be called patriarchal. But such a nominal definition does not, however, say anything about what mechanisms are at work, or why there are so many different types of patriarchies. In Sweden a report was published in 1986 on women and political power with the title *Hit – men inte längre?* (This far – but no further?). At that time, women’s representation in the Swedish *Riksdagen* was about 30 per cent. However, since then, the percentage has actually increased to the present 47. So, does the hypothesis of “this far, but no further” not apply in Sweden? The varying trends internationally challenge the thesis of the unambiguous reproduction of male dominated society, and shows the need for the application of nuance to the argument. This entire theory complex has been challenged by the time lag theory.

4.2 The time lag theory

As a reaction to what was seen as too pessimistic a perspective, the time lag theory presented a more positive description: the issue is primarily a question of a historical time lag. The book *Women in Nordic Politics. Closing the Gap* (Karvonen & Selle 1995) presented an alternative thesis to *Unfinished Democracy* from 1983. The time lag hypothesis is based on the assumption that mobilization at a lower level must reach a certain level before mobilisation is possible at the next level up. Thus women, too, will reach the highest positions in society – but with a certain time lag. Women are slowly, but surely, in a process of being integrated into the leadership of Nordic society. Although women are still under-represented among mayors and managers, a gender balance will be achieved in due time. The powerlessness of women is a myth, which makes us overlook the new power of women. Therefore a time lag theory is to be preferred to the theory of constant reproduction of patriarchy (Raaum 1995). The theoretical basis for the time lag thesis originates in, among others, the Norwegian researcher Stein Rokkan’s ideas of democratic development as thresholds, which are gradually crossed through the mobilisation of new groups of voters. Nina Raaum uses this macro theory for proving also that the mobilisation of women has undergone various stages and has expanded, both as to its width and its depth (Raaum 1995). As is obvious, this theory focuses on the mobilization and activation of women, and on the improvement of women’s resources. The explanation for women’s under-representation is sought in a historical time lag. Before a company can have a female president, there must have been a female vice president. The time lag theory can be interpreted as assuming that there is a certain line of development in society, where overspill from one sector to another takes place, and where development is regarded as irreversible (Karvonen & Selle 1995).

Empirically, the time lag hypothesis is supported by the actual, strong increase in the proportion of women in a large number of areas, not least within politics. The presentation in Table 2, with thresholds which are crossed in a historically progressive process, is as such an illustration of
the time lag theory. The time lag thesis is applied both to development in society at large and to development in specific areas. As in the case of the theory of patriarchy, this is a macro theory, which has become popular and is included in the general public debate.

As said above, the time lag theory has gained support in the historical development. That is, until now. The very latest stagnation in women’s representation attaches a question mark to this theory. Will gender balance appear over time – all by itself? Women are now on the labour market, and young women receive as extensive an education – if not more extensive – as young men. And nevertheless 75–90 per cent of society’s elite are men.

It has been proved in the area of academia that the time lag theory has a significant limp, since the proportion of women among lecturers and professors is only slowly increasing, despite the proportion of female students, candidates and PhDs having increased for several years (Henningsen et al. 1998). Similarly, a cohort analysis on Swedish data also attaches a question mark to the time lag theory. Among a group of women and men who finished their doctorates in 1991, 8 per cent of the men, but only 4 per cent of the women from the same professions became professors within a 12-year period (Personal vid universitet och högskolor 2005).

So, the time lag theory is currently being challenged by actual developments in several areas. One example is the mentioned decrease in the number of female mayors in Denmark after the structural reform of 2005, which merged 276 municipalities into 98 large municipalities. Despite the growing proportion over many years of women who have been chairs of committees within local councils and held other important posts within local politics, the proportion of women among the Danish mayors was lower in 2005 than in the late 1980s. It is this increasing doubt as to whether gender equality will manifest over time which also has stimulated the discussion of quotas. Developments in eastern and central European countries after the fall of the wall has also contributed to dealing a blow to the belief in a constantly progressing gender equality.

The time lag theory, like the theory of the reproduction of patriarchy, focuses on structural factors, but also on the mobilisation of and resources available to women. And naturally women’s entry onto the labour market and their increasing levels of education have had a great impact. But even after the women have entered the labour market with at least as long an education as men, old and established sectors remain male-dominated at the top and so also do newer industries, such as IT, which has mainly male managers. Will the time lag theorists’ response be, that a sufficient number of years have simply not yet passed to make judgment? Or must other theories be taken into account?

4.3 The saturation theory

A Danish researcher on local politics, Ulrik Kjær, has presented an alternative theory: “saturation without parity”. It is an interesting thesis, saying that the increase in female representation can stagnate before gender balance has been achieved, because a certain “saturation” has been reached. The saturation theory is based on the assumption that both the party organisations that nominate candidates, and the voters “simply have had enough of women, and are satisfied with the present level” (Kjær 2001: 70).

The time lag theory and the saturation theory, thus, are opposites (Kjær 1999:162). The saturation theory does, however, have certain similarities with the “this far, but no further” perspective, but it operates on the organisational or meso level: the analysis focuses on the recruitment practices of the political parties. On the basis of thorough analyses of the development of female representation on Danish local councils, Ulrik Kjær even claims to be able to point to the existence of a critical point: that of 31 per cent. This is supported by the fact that the proportion of women in the Danish local elections in 1997 increased most on those lists that had a low female proportion to begin with, while the women’s representation decreased for over half of the lists from which over approximately 30 per cent women had been elected in 1993. Survey data further support the hypothesis. Kjær’s study among the chairs of local party organisations shows that two thirds think that it is important or very important to have a more or less equal number of candidates of both genders. But the study also shows that an equal distribution to them does not necessarily mean 50-50. On the contrary, nine of ten local party chairs, whose lists include
over 30 per cent women, are satisfied with that result (2001). According to Ulrik Kjær, the potential for increased female representation has been capitalised – and thus exhausted (1999; 2001). He claims that there is a difference between the "saturation points" of various parties, but the phenomenon is found within all of them (2001).

Ulrik Kjær has developed his saturation theory on the basis of the Danish stagnation. He adds himself that it must be tested in other countries, too. And it is precisely this point at which the saturation hypothesis reveals its shortcomings. If a saturation point of about 30 per cent can be identified in Denmark – and Kjær is obviously making a correct observation here – why have the rest of the Nordic countries succeeded in reaching between 36 and 42 per cent? The saturation theory cannot explain why it seems that of the Nordic countries only Denmark has come to a saturation point!

Lenita Freidenvall has studied the significance of gender in Sweden, where the proportion of women is already very high. Does this mean that gender plays a less important role now? In her extensive analysis of attitudes and practices in the nomination committees of Swedish political parties for the 2002 parliamentary election, Lenita Freidenvall shows that even if many criteria are considered in the Swedish context when the list is composed, and even if the proportion of women already was as high as 42 per cent, the majority of the nomination committee chairs still ranked an equal gender distribution as the most important factor (2006). Neither have countries such as Costa Rica and Belgium reached a saturation point at 30 per cent, but, on the contrary, they have introduced legislation on even higher proportions, 40 and 50 per cent, of women on the electoral lists, as well as strict rules on the ranking of candidates on the lists.

In short, it seems implausible, that there would exist a general limit of 30 per cent. The feeling of saturation is constructed in a certain context, and is the result of a great number of circumstances. It is obvious, that other factors must be considered.

5. The significance of public debate and the pressure from women’s movements

If we disagree with the thesis that gender equality will appear as a historical necessity, and yet do not think that male dominance reproduces itself in all periods of time and in all areas, nor that there is an absolute saturation point at about 30 per cent, then other perspectives have to be included in the analysis and the political debate.

My own analyses of the historical development in the Nordic countries, and my comparisons of the astonishing differences between developments in Sweden and in Denmark since the 1990s, as well as my research on the use of quotas in politics globally, have pointed to the significance of two interlinked factors: 1) changes in the discursive framework about gender, and 2) the power of women’s movements.

There are great differences over time and between countries as to the perception of women’s political representation. The perceptions vary from the traditional view that politics is a male business or that gender is irrelevant, to specific theories on why women are under-represented. A marked new position is the notion that gender equality has more or less been achieved already. However, this is so only for the "natives", not for immigrants, as it is put in totally unreasonable generalisations (Dahlerup 2004 and 2007a). It is noteworthy that the stagnation in women’s representation – and in the gender equality debate in general – happens in both Denmark and the Netherlands at a time, when the immigration debate is at its liveliest and xenophobia is increasing (Leyenaar 2007). This obviously calls for closer comparative analyses.

The general thesis is that the discursive framework, that is, the dominant perceptions of women’s position in society at large and in politics in particular, is crucial for the attitudes and actions of the political parties and the voters. This is where the women’s movements enter the scene. The women’s movements have continually challenged these dominant views by using various strategies. The progress or stagnation of women’s representation is thus also connected with the power of the women’s movements. The pressure from women’s movements has undoubtedly been crucial for the development of women’s representation in the Nordic countries; this per-
tains to pressure both from autonomous women’s movements and from women within the trade unions, and from the women’s organisations and groups within the political parties, which were previously so strong (Dahlerup 1998 and 2001). Also gender studies have probably been an additional and important factor behind the increasing women’s representation in the Nordic countries.

The perspective used here also includes an actor perspective, and the focus is then on the significance of the women’s movement for changing the discursive framework as well as for the various forms of pressure that have been directed at the political institutions. Inspiration for this type of analysis comes from the Australian political theorist Carol Bacchi, whose argument is that policy analyses have been far too problem-centred and focused on how these problems are to be solved. But each suggestion contains an explicit or implicit diagnosis of what is understood as the actual problem, and much of the political struggle is about this – a point which is not unfamiliar to any women’s movement, it might be added.

Thus, the central feature in Bacchi’s analysis is how the problem is constructed and presented in the first place. She calls her perspective the “What’s the problem approach” (Bacchi 1999: 1f). So, how has the diagnosis been made in the debate on women’s under-representation? The following are a few focal points:

In the past, it was common to mainly blame the low representation of women on the women themselves. The women are the problem. And when women’s representation increased, it was said that the women had finally pulled themselves together! This was typical of the period up to the 1970s, but this perspective was highly problematic (Dahlerup 2001).

An alternative diagnosis, which was important not least in the Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s, and which created a strong and effective pressure, puts the primary responsibility for women’s representation on the political parties. The diagnosis here is that it is the parties, with their traditional recruitment practices and the entire political cultural context, which constitutes the problem. It should be added, that in the present heated debate on gender quotas for the boards of joint-stock companies, following the Norwegian example, the old debate on women’s resources and qualifications has nevertheless appeared again in its entirety.

In this alternative view, the parties are criticized for not recruiting women to a sufficient extent. The parties are the gatekeepers, and it is they who are not able to, or do not want to, recruit as many female as male candidates. This view can be named a *discourse of exclusion*. The same perspective can be recommended for analysis of the political underrepresentation of ethnic minorities and immigrants. As gatekeepers, the parties possess the power to change imbalances. This alternative discourse has appeared strongly in many countries today, also outside the Nordic countries, particularly perhaps in post-conflict countries. The point of departure here is a justice perspective. In a democracy women have the right to equal representation. Women form half of the population, and if women in a purely statistical sense do not get a corresponding proportion of the places, this must be blamed on various mechanisms of exclusion, primarily in the organisations themselves.

These mechanisms affect both the demand and supply side of the nomination process, that is, both the recruitment practices of the political parties and the women’s willingness to be nominated.

The UN Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, represents this alternative discourse. The focus of this document – and in many corresponding international documents today – is aimed at the institutional and cultural barriers and exclusion mechanisms that obstruct an equal gender distribution in decision-making processes. At the same time, the demand has been radicalized from the earlier “more women in politics” to “gender balance”.

Taken together, this diagnosis and this target result in the demand for active political measures (positive action, affirmative action, special measures). Although the controversial word ‘quota’ is not written directly into it, the Beijing declaration has been used by women’s movements all over the world as support for their demand for quotas in order to rapidly remedy the under-representation of women (Dahlerup 2006; see also www.quotaproject.org). However, there are,
as has been pointed out, several possible forms of active political measures, of which quotas is only one. The crucial factor seems to be the level of pressure on the political parties and on political leaders in general.

Thus, the conclusion is that it is a lack of political pressure, in combination with a notion that gender equality will manifest automatically, or actually has already been more or less achieved, which explains the stagnation in women’s representation which is being seen within certain areas in the Nordic countries. But this conclusion also indicates that stagnation is not a permanent state; glass ceilings can be broken. The Nordic region has for a long time been at the top of the league in a global comparison when it comes to women’s political representation. Today the leading position of the Nordic countries is challenged by a number of countries both in the global South and in Europe, such as Belgium and Spain. This is a positive development, but seen from a Nordic perspective, this challenge should lead to further attempts to speed up the process of improving women’s representation in the Nordic countries, both within politics and in the many other areas of society where the proportion of women is significantly lower than in political assemblies.

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Women's representation in local politics. The neglected achilles' heel of gender equality

With 93 male mayors, and men making up 73 per cent of representatives on municipal councils, Denmark lags sorely behind when it comes to women's representation in local politics. The past ten years have seen a slowdown in development, and the structural reform and merger of municipalities in 2007 was, in total, a setback for gender equality in politics. How may we explain this development, and what can be done to reverse it?

By Ann-Dorte Christensen

Gender equality in politics is a focus of attention both in Denmark and internationally. In Denmark, we see it in our political parties, a majority of which are now headed by women. And on an international level, it has been clear for years that women are getting involved in the jostling for top posts in the political world. In Germany and Finland women have, with Angela Merkel and Tarja Halonen respectively, succeeded in being elected to the highest office. Elsewhere, they are mounting a credible challenge for presidential posts, witness Ségolene Royal in France and – not least – Hillary Clinton and Sara Palin in the USA. Albeit still charged with gendered metaphors, high-powered female politicians are no longer a rarity.

In affirmation hereof, the increasing number of women holding top posts display both diversity and variety. One has but to consider the differences between Pia Kjærgaard of Dansk Folkeparti (the Danish People's Party) and Margrethe Vestager of Det Radikale Venstre (the Danish Social-Liberal Party), or to think of the US election, where Hillary Clinton and Sara Palin represent stark differences in form and contents. For our purposes, what is important is that the "gender card" is being played as a central parameter in the struggle for votes in Denmark, in the Nordic countries, and internationally.

In the Nordic countries, women's representation in parliament has increased steadily since World War II, although the Danish numbers have stagnated at just under forty per cent women in later years and we have been overtaken by a number of countries, including Rwanda, Cuba, and Argentina (for more information, see Text 2).

The level of women's political representation in parliament and the ensuing question concerning Denmark's status as a "glass ceiling country" is a crucial issue in terms of both democracy and gender equality politics. But fortunately, it is an issue that is already in the gender-political spotlight. However, I mean to argue that the debate over gender equality in political representation has neglected the local level, and thus has not focused attention to a sufficient degree on the blatant problems of gender equality in women's representation in municipal politics. Firstly, this has meant that the explanations and theories developed around the issue of women's political representation are primarily tied to the national level. And secondly, it has meant that scant attention has been paid to the municipal level of politics.
The accepted lower limit for gender distribution on the local level is far lower than on the parliamentary level. There is, for example, little doubt that a national parliament in the Nordic countries seating 73 per cent men (the percentage of male representatives in Danish municipal councils) would be considered a blemish to the idea of the Nordic countries as a region of gender equality.

And in all likelihood no Nordic prime minister would dare appoint a government in which women were represented by only 8 per cent (the percentage of female mayors in Denmark). There is a lot of talk about a "glass ceiling" on the parliamentary level, but little attention is paid to the fact that this ceiling is even lower on the municipal level.

This article shines the spotlight on women's representation in municipal politics in Denmark. I shall not focus much attention on general explanations for low levels of women's representation, but shall instead try to pin down the elements that are particularly characteristic of the low levels of representation on the municipal level. I do this by first clarifying the historical development in women's political representation on the municipal level (as compared to the national level). I then look at the debate surrounding the structural reform and merger of municipalities in 2007 and, following on from this, the distribution of municipalities with a relatively "high" percentage of female representatives versus municipalities with a relatively "low" percentage of female representatives in the 2005 municipal elections. Towards the end of the article, I discuss possible explanations and propose strategies going forward.

The Development of Women's Representation in Local Politics.

Table 1: % of women elected to Parliament and to Municipal Councils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Municipalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945/1946</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964/1962</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971/1970</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977/1978</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984/1985</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994/1993</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/1997</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes for table 1:
In the first column, the numbers to the left of the slash indicate the year of the parliamentary election while the numbers to the right indicate the year of the municipal election. The percentage of women in Parliament is calculated based on 175 seats. The four seats allocated to Greenland and the Faroe Islands are thus not included.
Table 2:
Percentage of female government ministers and mayors in selected years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government Ministers</th>
<th>Mayors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947/1946</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975/1974</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982/1981</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987/1989</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/1997</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note for table 2:
In the first column, the numbers to the left of the slash indicate the year for the percentage of female government ministers following parliamentary elections. The number to the right indicates the year for the percentage of female mayors following municipal elections.


If we turn our attention first to the development of women's political representation in the Danish Parliament and on municipal councils, table 1 shows that the post-war period saw steady increases in the percentage of women elected to office. Furthermore, developments in Parliament and in the municipalities are nearly parallel up until the mid-1980s, with the percentage of women elected increasing from fewer than five per cent to around twenty-five per cent. However, women's representation in municipal politics has remained around the mid-1980s level (27 per cent), while women's representation in Parliament has continued to increase up until the mid-1990s (38 per cent). From this point onward, both political levels have seen stagnation in women's representation, and expectations of a continual progression have not been met (Christensen and Damkjær, 1998).

Turning our attention next to the percentage of women in the Danish political elite (government ministers and mayors), table 2 shows that throughout post-war Danish history, there has been a higher percentage of female government ministers than of female mayors. Around 33 per cent of the ministers in the Nyrop government (centre-left) were women. That percentage has dropped under the centre-right government. However, this trend has been reversed in the latest cabinet reshuffles, where 37 per cent of the appointed ministers have been women. The percentage of female mayors has been stuck around 9 per cent since the 1990s, and has even dropped following the latest municipal elections (in 2005). At any rate, the structural reform and merger of municipalities has not increased the percentage of female mayors. 92 per cent of the new municipalities are headed by men.

Table A (see PDF) and Table B (see PDF) in the Appendix amplify on this development, detailing developments in Parliament and in municipal councils from the time women first won electability up until the present day. With respect to the disparity in the percentage of women in Parliament and in the municipal councils, it is worth noting that the tables show that voters are more inclined to vote for women in parliamentary elections than in municipal elections. Thus we see that in parliamentary elections since 1971, a higher percentage of women have been elected than the percentage of female candidates who ran. By way of example, 32 per cent of the candidates at the latest parliamentary elections (2007) were women, while 38 per cent of elected...
representatives were women. The reverse is true for municipal elections, where the percentage of women elected is lower than the percentage of female candidates. In the 2005 municipal elections, 30 per cent of the candidates were women, while 27 per cent of elected representatives were women. This demonstrates that voters are more inclined to vote for women in parliamentary elections than in municipal elections. It also underscores the fact that if we are to change the unequal representation of women, it is not enough to focus on parties' lists of candidates. A broader gender equality focus is also required.

To summarise, women's political representation in Denmark has faced its highest barriers at the local level, as demonstrated by a stagnation in the percentage of women in municipal councils below the 33 per cent mark, and as illustrated with even greater clarity with respect to the gender distribution of mayoral posts, more than 90 per cent of which are held by men. The structural reform has not changed these numbers. To the contrary, it has played a part in cementing the low representation of women on the local level, and has possibly lowered the percentage of female mayors.

In the following, I will take a closer look at the structural reform, and subsequently examine variations between different municipalities in the latest municipal elections (2005) in greater detail.

The Structural Reform and the Merger of Municipalities

The structural reform, which took effect in 2007, is the most significant restructuring of the Danish welfare state in decades. But although the reform had gender-related implications, the question of gender equality was all but entirely absent in the debate over the reform.

At bottom, the government in its work on the structural reform failed to live up to the Danish Sex Discrimination Act. By way of example, the make-up of the Structural Commission was significantly skewed in terms of the ratio of men to women – with thirteen men and one woman – and thus did not live up to the Gender Discrimination Act's stipulations on equal distribution of membership in public committees, commissions etc. Furthermore, the structural reform was gender blind. Gender plays no part in the structural committee report and is not mentioned as a central issue in its recommendations. The Sex Discrimination Act's stipulations on mainstreaming – i.e. that public authorities must promote gender equality in their work and consider the implications for gender equality in all planning and administration – have not been adhered to. Of the original 46 proposed bills, only 4 had been evaluated in terms of gender equality impact. (Information 3 January 2005; Christensen, 2005; Østergaard, 2004)

But why does the structural reform have such far-reaching impact on gender equality? First and foremost because men and women have different levels of association to the public sector – both as citizens, as employees, and as users of services. This is true as citizens because democratic ideals should include an equal presence of men and women in public assemblies on all levels (Teigen & Skjeie, 2003). As employees because more than 70 per cent of public employees at the local level are women, which means that changes to working conditions for public employees will affect women more than men. As users because welfare services are to a great degree still tied to a gendered division of labour, with women closely associated with care work. Furthermore, the political opinions of men and women differ in general, with women typically being more positively inclined towards the welfare state and more sceptical of tax cuts, outsourcing and privatisation than men (Borchorst & Christiansen, 2005; Borchorst & Goul Andersen, 2006).

Returning to the question of citizens, the low representation of women at the local level was actually one of the issues that caught the government's attention in the process of hammering out the structural reform. The Department of Gender Equality launched a study of whether larger municipal units would increase the percentage of women in municipal councils. The study was carried out by Tina Kjær Bach of FREIA, The Gender Research Center at Aalborg University (Bach, 2005). The report centres on a comparative study of developments in women's representation in larger and smaller municipalities in the period from the 1970 municipal reform onward.
When we look more closely at the individual areas, it becomes clear that differences outweigh similarities in the Danish municipalities. Both larger and smaller municipalities stand out for having high, low, and alternating degrees of women's representation. For instance, the report shows that the largest municipalities (more than 50,000 inhabitants) on average have around 40 per cent women in the municipal councils on Zealand, but only 29 per cent in Jutland.

Louise Gade, the first female mayor of Aarhus (2001-2005).

There is great variation within this interval. Aarhus – the largest municipality in Jutland, and the second largest in Denmark – has only 23 per cent women on the municipal council, while Horsens – which has just over 50,000 inhabitants – has 56 per cent women. Women's representation in the Aarhus municipal council plummeted from 42 to 23 per cent in the 2001 municipal elections. The smallest group of municipalities (fewer than 8000 inhabitants) also display both remarkably high and remarkably low percentages of women in the municipal councils. Thus Holmsland has 46 per cent female council members, while Læsø is still a so-called black spot with no women in the municipal council (Back, 2005).

In total, the report uncovers a weak nationwide correlation between larger municipalities and a larger percentage of women in the municipal councils. But the calculations also show that it is the municipalities on Zealand, and particularly in the Capital Region of Denmark, that help establish the correlation. It is not so much the number of inhabitants as the degree of urbanisation and the labour force participation rate of women which positively influences women's representation. In other words, merging a number of smaller rural municipalities does not in and of itself impact gender equality. In addition to this point, the report also emphasises that the degree of women's representation is fluctuant and variable, and that it is closely tied to local political culture (Bach 2005).

"High" and "Low" Municipalities Following the 2005 Elections

As previously mentioned, the merger of municipalities in connection with the structural reform did not lead to a higher degree of women's representation in the new municipal councils. The level of representation remained unchanged at 27 per cent. Basing themselves in information from Statistics Denmark, the Women's Council in Denmark prepared a memorandum in 2007 on the percentage of women in the various municipalities (Women's Council in Denmark, 2007). Drawing on this material, I have come up with the following division into "high" and "low" municipalities, where "high" municipalities have more than 40 per cent women in the municipal council and "low" municipalities have 20 per cent or less. (2)

In concurrence with Bach's study, Table 3 shows that "high" percentages of women in the municipal councils are primarily found in the Capital Region of Denmark. It sticks out that this region is the only one with more than three "high" municipalities, and is also the only region with just one "low" municipality (Albertslund). The regions west of the Great Belt have a marked overrepresentation of municipalities with "low" women's representation. For instance, the Region of Southern Denmark has a whopping ten "low" municipalities (e.g. Esbjerg, Kolding and Middelfart), while the North Denmark Region sticks out by having no "high" municipalities. Beside these very general trends, a few other things jump out at the reader of Table 3.

Firstly, it is worth emphasising that the large municipalities (with the exception of Copenhagen) in general have a fairly low degree of women's representation despite being relatively urbanised. Thus, neither Aalborg nor Odense nor Aarhus make the cut for the category of "high" women's representation. In Aalborg, the percentage of women in the municipal council is 36, in
Odense it is 31, and in Aarhus it is only 23. Aarhus is a particularly interesting case because the percentage of women in the municipal council plummeted to its lowest level in more than twenty years following the 2005 elections (See Appendix, Table C). Women's representation in the Aarhus municipal council topped at 42 per cent the 1997 elections, but dropped considerably, to 23 per cent, in the 2001 elections.

Table 3: "High" and "low" municipalities by region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>“High” Percentage Women</th>
<th>“Low” Percentage Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital Region of Denmark</td>
<td>9 Municipalities</td>
<td>1 Municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ballerup (48)</td>
<td>Albertslund (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frederiksberg (48)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Furesø (40)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gentofte (53)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gladsaxe (44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>København (45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lyngby-Tårnby (43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rudersdal (41)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tårnby (47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region Zealand</td>
<td>2 Municipalities</td>
<td>4 Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kege (41)</td>
<td>Guldborgssund (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soerø (40)</td>
<td>Lolland (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ringsted (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sore (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region of Southern Denmark</td>
<td>3 Municipalities</td>
<td>10 Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Billund (40)</td>
<td>Aabenraa (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fanø (46)</td>
<td>Bogense (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kerteminde (40)</td>
<td>Esbjerg (19)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kolding (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Middelfart (20)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nyborg (20)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sønderborg (16)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tånder (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Varde (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ærø (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Denmark Region</td>
<td>1 Municipality</td>
<td>5 Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horsens (48)</td>
<td>Favrskov (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Herning (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norddjurs (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ringkebing-Skjern (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Skanderborg (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Denmark Region</td>
<td>No Municipalities</td>
<td>5 Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frederikshavn (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hjørring (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rebild (16)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thisted (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vesthimmerland (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an apparent paradox, the 2005 elections also saw Louise Gade of Venstre (The Liberal Party of Denmark) take over as mayor. Although touted as a milestone of gender equality in politics, the first female mayor of Aarhus was appointed following an election that had also seen a significant drop-off in women’s representation in the municipal council at large. It is noteworthy that
this marked drop did not occasion much debate, especially considering the fact that Aarhus had previously had a relatively "high" degree of women's representation and a focus on municipal gender equality (Bach, 2004, Dahlerup, 2003).

Secondly, it is worth emphasising municipalities with a relatively "high" percentage of women in the municipal council. Here, Gentofte Municipality sticks out: with 53 per cent women, it is the only municipality in Denmark where women outnumber men in the municipal council. Following the 2001 elections, six municipalities had a female majority. One of these was Horsens. Horsens also stands out in terms of the most recent election (2005). It is the municipality with the highest percentage of women in the council, 48 per cent, outside of the Capital Region of Denmark (see Appendix, Table D).

Horsens standing out with a relatively high percentage of women is nothing new. The percentage of women in the Horsens municipal council has, with the exception of a drop-off in 1974, increased steadily. Horsens has often been highlighted as a town that shines the spotlight on gender and gender equality. For instance, resourceful groups of "redstockings" put women's politics on the agenda back in the 1970s and later contributed to a relatively high degree of institutionalised in the form e.g. of municipal gender equality policies (Dahlerup, 1998).

Although Horsens and Aarhus were both among the first Danish municipalities to establish gender equality committees, vast differences have apparently made themselves felt when it comes to maintaining focus on gender equality policy. Firstly, the two cases show that a connection between women politicians taking top posts and the more general representation of women in the municipal council does not necessarily exist. Secondly, that it is important to maintain a debate about, and push for, municipal gender equality. Drude Dahlerup has called this the necessity of maintaining an argument of exclusion – that is, an argument for a more equal representation (as opposed e.g. to arguments that women have other priorities in life than men) (Dahlerup, 2001).

All in all, we may conclude that women's representation on the municipal level has stagnated at a low level of less than 33 per cent. The extensive structural reform with its new distribution of duties and merger of municipalities has done nothing to change this. On the contrary, the already low percentage of female mayors has now dropped to seven – the lowest ratio in more than 25 years. Studies show that there is a tendency that the number of inhabitants and the degree of urbanisation in a municipality may favour a higher percentage of women in the municipal council.

However, this tendency is based mostly on the Capital Region of Denmark, whereas other major cities – such as Aarhus – demonstrate just how unstable and tied to local political culture and developments, women's representation can be. The results thus also indicate that establishing a local focus and debate on gender equality – in the individual municipalities – is an important parameter for women's political representation. This focus of the gender equality effort was overlooked in the debate over the structural reform. Instead, we must conclude that gender equality on the municipal level looks even more dismal following the reform, with 73 percent of municipal council members and 93 percent of mayors being men.
Playing Catch-Up, Male Power Hierarchies, or Women Opting Out?

How are we to explain this development? In general, researchers have proposed competing explanations for women's lack of political representation. In Text 2 Drude Dahlerup presents the four most popular theories: the theories of gender power, theories of playing catch-up, theories of satiation, and theories of the discursive framework/the significance of the women's movement. There is no doubt that these theories may furnish us with elements that go a long way towards explaining the lack of gender equality in municipal politics. Christensen & Damkjær (1998) and Bach (2005) outline another typology, which makes a distinction between the marginalisation hypothesis, which emphasises gender power and the continued subordination of women when it comes to political representation, and the catch-up hypothesis, which claims that it takes time for women – as a newly mobilised group – to become fully integrated into the political sphere. Christensen & Damkjær argue that neither the marginalisation hypothesis nor the catch-up hypothesis is capable of furnishing satisfactory explanations. This is first and foremost due to the fact that general and systemic explanations are not applicable to this particular field. “Instead, a broad and multivalent framework for interpretation capable of accommodating the complexity that characterises the field must be established” (p. 32).

Today – ten years later – I would still argue for the necessity of developing more complex explanations. These would have to, on the one hand, be capable of considering the variation between different political arenas (e.g. the EU, national parliaments, and municipal councils), and, on the other, be sensitive to changes which are often asynchronous (for instance, the percentage of women increases in some areas, while it decreases in others).

In light of this, I will, by way of rounding off, discuss some of the different explanations – not in terms of general or systemic interpretations, but specifically tied to the outlined developments in women's representation in local politics in Denmark.

In Norway, studies have shown that there is a particular element of catch-up in women's political integration on the municipal level, one of the explanations for which is that the local level often involves a more traditional outlook on relationships between the sexes (Raaum, 1995). There is no doubt that some of the roadblocks that women come up against may be explained by local gender-stereotypical ideas. The analysis in the above of the relationship between “high” and “low” municipalities shows that there seems to be particular problems involved in gender equality in areas west of the Great Belt. On the other hand, the analysis also shows that the second-largest city in Denmark, Aarhus, has developed severe problems with gender equality even after having previously had a relatively positive gender equality status. This cannot be explained by mechanisms of cultural catch-up, but rather, it would seem, by a shift from a strong to a weak discourse of gender equality.

There is no way around power and influence if we are to explain such levels of male overrepresentation in local officeholders. The “birds of a feather”-mechanism seems to be alive and kicking in areas with strong, male-dominated local hierarchies of power. It would seem that these hierarchies of power armed themselves for the struggle of hanging on to existing positions of power in the face of the coming structural reform and merger of municipalities. This became clear, for instance, in the debate over the merger of municipalities, where existing municipalities clearly worked diligently to maintain or increase their influence. The fact that there were now fewer seats in municipal councils, and fewer mayoral positions, to vie for did not seem to favour women's representation. Arguments were rarely tied to gender, centering instead on parties and localities.

A third explanation that is important in any attempt to understand the latest developments is the question of discursive frameworks. As mentioned, gender and gender equality were overlooked in the debate over the structural reform. The question was not put on the agenda “from the top down” in connection with the work of the structural commission, and the government paid little attention to it. Likewise, the degree to which gender and gender equality was put on the agenda “from the bottom up” – that is, in the municipalities and in the political parties, for instance in election meetings and when making up lists of candidates – seems random and sporadic.
Finally, I should like to mention a fourth issue, which I think has been overlooked in trying to explain the unequal representation of men and women in local politics: the question of differences in the local participation profiles of men and women. Several studies have shown significant differences in men’s and women’s local participation profiles. While men take part in election meetings leading up to municipal elections and participate in meetings on questions of local and municipal politics to a greater degree than women, it seems that women participate in meetings in local institutions such as schools and day care centres to a greater degree than men. Women are thus interested in local politics, but appear to concentrate their efforts and activities outside the formal political system. Furthermore, working conditions in municipal politics constitute a gendered barrier. Unlike parliamentary politics, municipal politics is not a full-time job, but something you undertake in your “free time” – a free time which women (and men with young children) have a hard time finding in their packed day to day lives. In other words, it would seem that local political culture may often be based on an outdated and traditional division of labour between the sexes, which is more amenable to the everyday lives and family responsibilities of older men. Furthermore, women (and particularly young women) have a very low level of party membership at less than ten per cent. In other words, there’s no great female potential poised to challenge the men on local electoral lists (Christensen & Siim, 2001; Christensen & Tobiasen, 2007).

Karen Delfs, Mayor of Vejle, 2006, wearing a tailor-made dress at a party for the "old" staff ahead of the merger of municipalities. Photo: Henrik Elkjær.

By way of summing up, I would like to point out that the low percentage of women in municipal councils and mayoral positions must be explained by an interplay of different factors. Issues of catch-up may, doubtless, be part of the picture in some municipalities, but they are not the whole explanation. It would seem that the combination of local power hierarchies vying to maintain existing positions in the face of the structural reform and merger of municipalities combined with a lack of focus on policies of gender equality has played a decisive role. In those cases where gender equality made it on to the agenda, it has mostly been kept on a symbolic level.

In the words of Groucho Marx:

"Pardon me, Madam, I would offer you my chair, were it not for the fact that I’m sitting on it myself!"

Strategies and the Road Ahead

It looks like it will take a special effort to channel the local commitment shown by women into municipal politics. It would make sense to concentrate on:

1. Emphasising that municipal politics is very much about gender. There is need of a more substantive political discussion of developments in the municipalities in later years, including a look at the gender-specific consequences for both users and employees. It is not enough to speak of changed structures and new authority – we must speak of fundamental changes in welfare and social policy. We should not be fooled by talk of closeness and inclusiveness or quality assurance, but should instead render visible the fact that this could mean privatisation and worse and less professional competence
2. Shining the spotlight on gender equality and gender balance. It is imperative that we render gender imbalances visible and debate gender balance as a democratic ideal. On a parliamentary level, democratic assemblies with a greatly skewed gender balance are no longer legitimate, but on the municipal level, we need an increased focus on women's right to be represented in public assemblies. We also need a discussion on local differences, since ideals and demands for gender balance should not apply east of the Great Belt.

3. Having a critical discussion of political culture in the parties. The question here is whether the parties are actively working to put women on the ballot in municipal elections. Are women getting good spots on the ballot, or are they still mostly ornamental? Are the parties doing enough with respect to clearly stating that both sexes are needed in local democracy? We also need to concentrate more on the importance of voting for women.

4. Working conditions in local politics. What is the meeting culture like, and is it based on an "old boys' network" and the everyday lives of men? Could the meeting hours be changed to better chime with a responsible family life with children? Should municipal politicians earn a wage so that they may be released from their jobs? We need to rid ourselves altogether of the idea that municipal politicians are people who have a woman to take care of the "home front".

5. Women's organisations and women's politics networks. The women's organisations and the women's politics networks face an important task developing collective strategies that will prompt women to run for office and get elected. It is necessary to work together across party lines to jointly foster debate and action on getting more women, with all the diversity and variation they display across the political spectrum, into municipal politics.

All told, the challenge going forward is to emphasise that a central part of the struggle to preserve and develop the welfare society in coming years is going to take place on the municipal level. And these important discussions and decisions should not be placed in the hands of municipal councils where more than 70 per cent of the members are men, nor of mayors of which more than 90 per cent are men.

Notes

For the sake of clarity, I have not included the level of county council districts (14 local authorities at a higher level than municipalities. Replaced in the 2007 structural reform by 5 regions). Here, too, the percentage of women has stagnated at around 30 per cent. In 2001, it dropped to 27 per cent, but in 2005 (with the shift to regional councils) surged to 34 per cent.

The terms "high" and "low" are relative. Thus, I have defined a "high" representation of women as one being above 40 per cent not because 40 per cent in and of itself is considered a "high" or "sufficient" degree of women's representation, but because it is significantly higher than the 27 per cent average.

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After the First 100 Years: Women in Danish Municipal Politics 1909-2009

The 2009 municipal elections were a special occasion because they marked a jubilee. The year 2009 was the centenary for the first representation of women on Danish municipal councils. A change to the election law in 1908 meant that women became eligible to stand as candidates and were granted suffrage in municipal elections.

By Ulrik Kjær

A Centenary

Normally, 1915 is mentioned as the year women got the right to vote and stand for election – but this concerned parliamentary elections.

In fact, women were already able to participate as both voters and candidates in the 1909 municipal elections. One consequence was that 1.3 per cent of the seats on municipal councils were won by women. The centenary was celebrated in style with various events in 2009, just as KVINFO initiated the festschrift: “Women in Local Government from 1909 to 2009 – Festschrift for 100 Years of Female Suffrage” (“Kvinder i kommunalpolitik 1909-2009 – Festskrift for 100 år med kvinders valgret”) (Larsen 2009).

The celebration of the centenary was of course one thing, but the jubilee also offered the possibility to pause and take stock of developments. Therefore, this chapter will examine how things have developed since 1909 and assess the present situation regarding women’s presence in Danish municipal politics. Whether the situation is considered good or bad is, of course, a matter of perspective. The fact remains that though it is 100 years since the perception that only men were suited to hold office in local government was done away with, there might still be people who believe that making political decisions is “a man’s job” (here to be taken literally and not in the meaning “man m/f”), and who therefore do not see any problems in the fact that there are not as many women as men on the municipal councils in Denmark.

On the other hand, there might also be people who consider political gender equality to be an important political goal and who are therefore critical of a situation where women and men are not represented in approximately equal numbers among elected politicians (Paxton 1997; Caul 2001). This more normative discussion is not the main topic of this chapter, which is primarily a description of the present situation: To what degree have women become part of the elite of local government, and what mechanisms might possibly stand in the way of the achievement of full numerical equality?

Even after 100 years, women have not reached a numerically equal representation so that their ratio of the municipal council members reflects the fact that half the population is female. Following the 2009 elections, women constituted 785 of the 2,468 elected to municipal councils – corresponding to 31.8 per cent. This was actually rather a big leap forward compared to the municipal elections in 2005, in which women took 689 of the 2,522 seats available at the time –
corresponding to 27.3 per cent. Moreover, the 2009 result is the so far highest percentage of women in local government – and the former record of 27.9 per cent from 1993 was beaten by a clear margin. Nevertheless, an increase of 4.5 percentage points in one election remains unusual. This becomes clear when looking at Figure 1, which shows the percentage of women on municipal councils since 1909.

Figure 1. The percentage of women among candidates, municipal councillors and mayors in municipal elections from 1909 to 2009.

Note: It has not been possible to find data about candidates prior to 1929 and mayors prior to 1970
Source: Danmarks Statistik (Statistics Denmark), various publications and the data base of Mayors.

Figure 1 also shows that, whereas the percentage of women hardly increased in the period until the Second World War (In the period from 1909 to 1943, the percentage of women only increased from 1.3 to 1.6), the number of female municipal councillors increased steadily from the end of the war and up until the beginning of the seventies. After 1970 elections, women constituted 10.5 per cent of the councillors. From 1970 to 1993, the ratio increased even faster (to the aforementioned 27.9 per cent), but hereafter, development ground to a halt and the ratio of women remained the same for three elections. This stagnation has been explained by the so-called saturation theory, which holds that a female representation of around 30 per cent in various municipal contexts is considered sufficient. (Kjær 1999, 2009). However, the stagnation
ended in 2009 when the number of female municipal councillors climbed above 30 per cent for the first time.

The 2009 elections were also good for female candidates in the sense that for the first time, the percentage of women elected to office surpassed the percentage of women among the candidates. As illustrated in Figure 17.1 the percentage of female candidates has, since at least 1929, been higher than the percentage of women elected. In other words, women have, traditionally, been weakened during the electoral process. But in 2009 this pattern was broken as 31.1 per cent women among the candidates became the aforementioned 31.8 per cent women elected to municipal councils. Furthermore, Figure 17.1 shows that 2009 also became a record year concerning female mayors. Following the elections in 2005, seven women were elected mayors by the municipal councils (see also Berg & Kjær 2005, 2007: 245). In 2009, that number doubled and 14 women became mayors. In spite of this, Figure 17.1 still shows that it is extremely difficult for women to break the “glass ceiling” (Dahlerup 2008) and take the top political power posts – at least when it comes to municipal politics.

The development in the percentage of women has been analysed and discussed before (see Bentzon 1981; Dahlerup 1988, 2008. Kjær 1997, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2009; Bach 2005) and therefore, the focus of this chapter will be the 31.8 per cent held by women at the present moment. The big question is why, at a time when many celebrate equality as a done deal – and at a time when we have a female prime minister – is it still the case that less than a third of the municipal councillors are women? Why do we not, even after 100 years, come close to numerical equality on the municipal councils?

The analysis will be based on two approaches. Firstly, there has been a tendency to build on an assumption that the development in women’s representation is the same everywhere. The fact is that the picture can vary from party to party and from municipality to municipality. This means that some places may have achieved numerical equality, while others drag the average down. Secondly, it is possible that the perception of the importance of gender equality is not as widespread as is often assumed, or at least that the willingness of the electorate to “correct” the numerical underrepresentation of women cannot be taken for granted. It is often assumed that it is only a matter of time until we reach numerical equality; but 100 years is a considerable length of time, and this article therefore also looks at what the electorate actually thinks about a higher proportion of women on municipal councils– including the opinions of both male and female voters.

**Differences in Women’s Representation in Parties and on Municipal Councils**

At least since Maurice Duverger, a specialist in political parties, introduced the idea that the political parties (and their voters) act differently in relation to the gender question (Duverger 1951,) focus has been on whether or not the representation of women is different from party to party (Caul 1999; Kjær 2004; Christmas-Best & Kjær 2007). The theory launched by Duverger is that left wing parties for ideological reasons have a more positive view of female candidates and therefore include them more often than do right wing parties. A side effect, according to the theory, is that this nomination of female candidates also puts pressure on the other parties to follow suit, as it is possible that some voters would want to vote for a woman because of gender politics (Darcy et al 1994: 54; Borisyuk et al 2007: 188). This more dynamic “contamination effect” (Kjær 2010 a) has not been proven empirically (Darcy et al 194: 153; Caul 1999: 88; however, also see Studlar & Welch 1992). However, numerous studies have shown that there is generally a higher representation of women in left wing parties than in right wing parties. (Rule 1987; Reynolds 1999; Siaroff 2000; Paxton et al. 2007: 270).

This pattern can be recognised quite clearly on Danish municipal councils, as SF (the Socialist People’s Party) came out of the election in 2009 with the highest percentage of women among its local politicians (45 per cent) closely followed by Radikale Venstre (the Danish Social Liberal Party)(44 per cent), whereas Det Konservative Folkeparti (The Conservative Party) (29 per cent), Dansk Folkeparti (the Danish People’s Party) (28 per cent) and Venstre (The Liberal Party of Denmark) (27 per cent) have a relatively low degree of women’s representation. So-
cialdemokratiet (the Social Democratic Party) are in the middle with 32 per cent (The Unity List has 36 per cent but is not included in the following analysis because they have only few municipal councillors). Those differences are quite dramatic, and the tale of the low numerical representation of women on municipal councils could also be told as the tale of, on the one hand, two parties – SF and Radikale Venstre – who have almost as many women as men among their local politicians and, on the other hand, the other parties, who are lagging sorely behind and are dragging the average down below 32 per cent.

Figure 2. The percentage of women among elected local councillors at the elections from 1970 to 2009

![Graph showing the percentage of women among elected local councillors from 1970 to 2009](image)

**Note:** The Progress Party (1974-1993) and Danish People’s Party (1997-2009) are shown in the same graph.

**Source:** Calculated based on Danmarks Statistik (Statistics Denmark), “Statistiske Efterretninger”, various years.

To illustrate the development over time, the share of female politicians on municipal councils by party from 1970 to 2009 is shown in Figure 2 (there are no data prior to 1970). The figure shows that the differences between the parties have been relatively stable throughout the period (also see Kjær 2000). Apart from the fact that the percentage of women councillors from Radikale Venstre has fluctuated a bit more than is the case for the other parties, SF is actually the only party to break the pattern to some extent. This happened when they got a significantly greater number of women elected in 1978, and thus went from being the party with the lowest share to the one with the highest. Otherwise, the ranking among the parties is relatively stable, with Venstre and Dansk Folkeparti (before 1997 known as Fremskridtspartiet – The Progress Party) having fewest of women (in 2009 Venstre ranked lowest for the first time).
Just as there are differences in the percentage of women from party to party, one can take a look at the proportion of women from municipal council to municipal council. It has previously been shown that there are a relatively higher number of women in the more urbanised (and therefore more modern?) municipalities (Kjær 2010a). Following the structural reform in 2005, quite a number of rural and urban municipalities have become more mixed and therefore there is no longer any simple correlation between the degree of urbanisation (or for that matter the size of the municipality) and the share of women on the municipal council. Although the differences do not run along traditional lines, there are still substantial differences from municipality to municipality as demonstrated by Table 17.1, which shows the top 10 and the bottom 10 municipalities with respect to women’s representation in 2009.

Table 3 shows rather marked variations between the municipalities. Not only is there a big difference between the Gentofte municipality, with almost 60 per cent women on the municipal council, and the Stevns municipality, with only just over 10 per cent, it is also worth noting the fact that 10 municipalities have almost equal representation of men and women, while another 10 municipalities have less than 20 per cent women on the municipal council. The discussion about the low number of women in local government therefore has to be conducted on different backgrounds according to the municipality in question. In the Copenhagen area, there is no real cause for concern over underrepresentation of women. With 48 per cent women in Frederiksberg and 49 in Copenhagen, the issue is less urgent here than in many other places around the country.

Even though the variation in the percentage of women generally cannot be explained by the level of urbanisation, Table 3 still displays some degree of pattern as several of the highest scoring municipalities are located in the Copenhagen Metropolitan Area, whereas several of the low-scoring municipalities are situated some distance away from the capital. Thus, the average percentage of women in all the municipalities within the Capital Region of Denmark is 38.1, whereas the average percentage in the municipalities in the North Denmark Region is only 26.

Table 3. The 10 highest and the 10 lowest ranking municipalities by percentage of women on the municipal council following the 2005 structural reform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Ratio of women in the council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gentofte</td>
<td>57,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lyngby-Tårnby</td>
<td>52,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>København</td>
<td>49,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Frederiksberg</td>
<td>48,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Furesø</td>
<td>47,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hørsholm</td>
<td>47,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Glostrup</td>
<td>47,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Aalborg</td>
<td>45,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Viborg</td>
<td>45,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hillerød</td>
<td>44,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>Sønderborg</td>
<td>19,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Ringsted</td>
<td>19,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Jammerbugt</td>
<td>18,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Brønderslev</td>
<td>18,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Skanderborg</td>
<td>17,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>Morsø</td>
<td>14,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Aaø</td>
<td>13,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Varde</td>
<td>12,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Hedensted</td>
<td>11,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>Stevns</td>
<td>10,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Danmarks Statistik (Statistics Denmark), “Statistiske Efterretninger, div.”
The municipalities situated in Region Zealand, the Region of Southern Denmark and the Central Denmark Region score between the two extremities with 30.3, 28.3 and 31.4 per cent respectively.

Precisely in relation to the differences among the municipalities, it has been claimed that the structural reform could have an effect on the development of women’s representation. During the 2005 municipal elections, the percentage of female municipal councillors rose in the municipalities that were not merged with others in the reform. At the same time, the percentage of women dropped in the new municipalities that were created as result of mergers of several municipalities (seen in relation to the percentage of women in those municipalities that were part of the merger) (Kjær 2007). The reason is that in those municipalities that were part of a merger, there was a lot of focus in the 2005 elections on where the candidate came from (not least which of the former municipalities he or she used to belong to) and this diverted attention from other characteristics of the candidates, such as gender. Voters were probably more focused on achieving a municipal council with equal geographical representation than with equal gender representation (Kjær 2007). The question, however, is whether this difference in developments between the newly created municipalities and those who remained unchanged continued in the 2009 elections, or whether it was a one-time effect. To answer this question, Figure 17.3 shows the percentage of women in the municipalities that were part of a merger and in those who were not.

**Figure 4. The percentage of women in the group of municipalities that merged and the group of municipalities that remained unchanged after the 2005 structural reform.**

![Graph showing the percentage of women in municipalities merged and those who remained unchanged after the 2005 structural reform.](image)

**Note:** Municipalities are counted among the unchanged (32) or newly merged (243 before 2005, 66 after 2005) municipal depending on whether they were part of a merger in the structural reform or not.

**Source:** Danmarks Statistik (Statistics Denmark), “Statistiske Efterretninger”, various publications.
Figure 4 demonstrates that the women’s ratio throughout the period has been higher in the municipalities that were not merged than in those that was. The reason is that many of the municipalities that remained unchanged are the larger urban municipalities and the Copenhagen suburbs, which have traditionally had a higher representation of women. However, Figure 17.3 clearly shows that developments in the two types of municipalities have been quite parallel and that the demonstrated effect of the structural reform did not repeat itself in 2009. The percentage of women increased in both types of municipalities in 2009. The increase was actually a bit larger in the newly created municipalities, which in effect made up for the losses in 2005. When women seemed to lose out in the mergers, this was correct in 2005, but after the 2009 elections, it becomes clear that it was only a small bump in the road and that the negative effect has already been evened out.

Do Voters Want More Women on Municipal Councils?

Even though it is possible to prove that the low percentage of women is more pronounced in some parties and in some municipalities than it is in others, the general picture remains one of rather widespread underrepresentation of women. We therefore need to look for more general explanations of women’s difficulties gaining access to the upper echelons of municipal politics. An important hypothesis in this connection is that the focus on women’s representation does not play a significant role for the voters, or at least not a big enough role for them to vote for women in a significantly higher number now than they did in the past.

The elections for municipal councils are conducted by proportional representation on party lists. Voters can either give their vote to the party list or to one of the candidates on the list. It is common to use the system of equal ranking on the electoral list rather than prioritised ranking. As a consequence, the number of votes for each individual candidate determines who is elected.

Table 5. The share of male and female voters who at the local elections in 1978, 2005 and 2009 voted for the party list or gave their vote to a male or female candidate on the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1978</th>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for the party list</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for a male candidate</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for a female candidate</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note:</td>
<td>n = 1,555; 1,672 and 3,007 respectively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Kommunalvalgsundersøgelse (Study of the municipal elections) 1978, 2005 and 2009.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This means that voters could promote the female candidates if they wanted to, ensuring that their number on the municipal council matched their proportion of the population (Kjær 2007). As half the electorate is female, they alone could bring the ratio up to 50 per cent from one election to the next if they chose to vote for the women and divided their votes for the female candi-
dates in the right way. "All" that would be required in order to abolish the numerical underrepresentation of women is for women to vote for female candidates and actually let the gender (which can be deducted from the names on the ballot paper) play a crucial role for the way they cast their vote. To find out to which degree the voters act like this, voting patterns are calculated in Table 5 according to whether the voters voted for the party list or gave their vote to one of the candidates, either male or female.

Table 5 makes it clear that it is the voters themselves – including the female voters – who do not take the opportunity to significantly increase the percentage of women in Danish municipal politics. Only 28 per cent of the female voters voted for a female candidate in 2009, while as many as 43 per cent voted for a male candidate. Table 5 also shows that this number only increased slightly compared to the two other elections from which this type of voting pattern information exists: 1978 and 2005. More voters cast their vote for female candidates today than 30 years ago (there are also more women among the candidates), but both male and female voters have changed their voting patterns on this point. Furthermore, the fact is that the increase is not very high for any of the genders. Even today, relatively few voters chose to give their vote to female candidates.

Table 5 shows that if a voter chooses to vote for an individual candidate rather than the party list, the candidate’s gender is not a determining factor. But what factors then play a role when voters decide which candidates to vote for? Table 17.3 shows the distribution among a number of possible reasons for voting for a specific candidate in 2009.

Table 6 confirms that the voters do not consider the gender of the candidate to be very important. After the elections in 2005, the reasons mentioned were almost the same (Buch 2007: 130). The voters are much more preoccupied with the political views of the candidate and their ability to be part of the political game than with their background. With respect to gender, Table 6 even shows that to the extent that the voters do actually let their vote be influenced by the background of a candidate, the gender is the absolute lowest priority among the relevant characteristics. Voters are significantly more preoccupied with the candidate’s involvement in the local community and with which part of the municipality they live in than with demographic variables such as age and gender.

As demonstrated in Table 6 the gender of the candidate does play a larger role for female voters than for male voters, but even for the women, gender is still the least important variable. Female voters do not attach a great degree of importance to gender, and the numbers therefore do not indicate any potential that women could increase the level of female representation in municipal councils by simply giving their vote to a woman. Neither male nor female voters are willing to compromise to any significant degree on the political abilities and opinions of candidates in order to secure better representation of women. And the judgement of female voters as to which candidates possess the requisite political abilities and opinions seems to chime just fine with having less than 33 percent women on the municipal council.

Even though voters in their actions – given the current supply of candidates in their municipality – do little to increase the percentage of women to something even remotely resembling numerical equal representation, they still might have idealistic ideas about more gender-balanced municipal councils. In the studies of the municipal elections we conducted, we therefore asked voters directly if they think it is important that municipal councillors resemble the voters with respect to gender. The distribution of answers can be seen in Table 7.
Table 6. The importance of a number of candidates’ characteristics that played a role when choosing to vote for a candidate in the 2009 municipal elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The political views of the candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The candidate is good at the political game</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The candidate is involved in the local community life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The candidate is from my part of the municipality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The background of the candidate (Education, job)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The age of the candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gender of the candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some importance</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No importance</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=2,121 (weighted to match the general population)

Source: Kommunalvalgundersøgelse (Study of the municipal elections) 2009.
Table 7. Voter evaluation of the importance of municipal politicians reflecting the electorate in terms of gender and geographical origins in the 2009 municipal elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is important that the ratio of men and women reflect the ratio among the voters</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fully agree / Agree partly</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agrees nor disagrees</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly agree / Fully disagree</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| It is important that the local councillors be from different geographical parts of the municipality | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fully agree / Agree partly | 72 | 67 | 69 |
| Neither agrees nor disagrees | 16 | 17 | 17 |
| Partly agree / Fully disagree | 12 | 16 | 14 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Note: n=3,234 (weighted to match the general population)
Source: Kommunalvalgsundersøgelse (study of the local elections) 2009.

Table 7 shows that just over half of the voters agree that it is important that the local politicians reflect the electorate in terms of gender balance (although this also means that the other half does not find this particularly important). Among female voters, the share is even over 60 percent. However, Table 7 also shows that the voters actually consider a reflection of the geographical make-up of the municipality to be more important – and this is, notably, the case for both men and women. As mentioned in the above, there were speculations in connection with the structural reform that the question of geographical representation could take focus away from the question of a more equal representation of the genders. Both Table 6 and 7 shows that we are dealing with a more general issue. The voters would not necessarily mind having more women on the municipal councils but there are many other issues to consider when it comes to the make-up of the municipal council, and the gender distribution does not rank highest – quite the opposite, in fact.

Conclusion

At the 2009 municipal elections, women were able to celebrate the centenary of suffrage in and electability to municipal councils. And precisely in the year of the jubilee, the number of elected women in the municipal councils increased by more than 4 percentage points so that we now, with 31.8 percent women, have the highest ratio of women to men in Danish history. It is questionable whether the jubilee and the increased focus that the celebrations gave to the gender issue played any role in this development.

An alternative explanation could be that the 2009 elections were the first “ordinary” local elections in more than 10 years. In 2001, the focus on gender had been overshadowed by the national elections. Four years later, it was overshadowed by the focus on the structural reform. However, it is worth remembering that the stagnation in the development of women’s representation started as early as in 1997 (as early as 1993 for candidates), as illustrated in Figure 17.1.
Similarly, it is worth noting that the focus on gender among the voters, as shown in Table 17.3 and 17.4, continues to lag behind for instance the focus on the geographical background of the candidates. For many voters it is still more important to have someone elected from their part of the municipality than it is to make sure that a woman makes it onto the council.

Even though the significant progress for the women in the elections in 2009 can be considered as a well-chosen gift for the jubilee, it is probably appropriate that those who want a stronger numerical equal representation of women in Danish local government tone down the festive speeches. The fact remains that it is also possible to paint a darker picture 100 years after women became eligible to stand for election. Women are still a clear minority in Danish municipal politics. Women occupy less than a third of the seats on the municipal councils and less than a seventh of the mayoral posts. The analyses in this chapter do not indicate that those numbers will increase in the near future. If the stagnation from previous decades has been broken and the numbers of women continue to increase, the development will probably be relatively slow.

The reason for this is that the inclination of the voters to correct the situation is limited. It is possible for voters to elect more female municipal councillors, but they do not use their votes to increase the percentage of women on the municipal councils. This is goes women themselves, too. Even though they are a bit more interested in the gender issue than men are, the representation of women does not seem to be high on their agenda. Even if they want a better gender balance, most remain unwilling to compromise on their other political priorities by giving their vote to a woman as a form of affirmative action.

The conclusion in regards to women in Danish municipal politics is therefore – as has also been shown in previous studies (Kjær 1999, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2009) – that it is not possible to identify mechanisms in the institutional set up which systematically keep the women out. It seems that it is the attitude among the electorate – not least the lack of interest in the question of gender – which constitutes the major barrier to women coming to occupy a number of political posts in local government reflective of their share of the population. The percentage of women may still increase in future local elections. However, the attitudes among the electorate and the lack of focus on the gender issue, as it has been proven in this chapter, will probably mean that change will be slow in the years to come.

If the voters do not want to vote for the female candidates on the list what would then have to change in order to accelerate the development? While the voters are not impatient, there might well be some impatience among those who desire a greater degree of gender equality in municipal politics as well. There are two possibilities here.

Firstly, the widespread lack of interest among the electorate concerning the gender of the candidates might be turned into an offensive strategy: If the voters do not discriminate based on gender, then the ratio of women could be increased in the local councils by increasing the percentage of women among the candidates. As Figure 17.1 illustrated, the percentages of female candidates and women who are elected to office are proportionate. Therefore, a solution could be to get more women onto electoral lists, probably resulting in an increase in the percentage of elected women. The real good question is how to get more women to run as candidates? The political parties play one of the major roles in this process, as they are the ones who decide who gets to be on the electoral lists (Norris & Lovenduski 1995). There is some potential for change here, not least in the parties in the centre and on the right wing of the political spectrum and in the municipalities outside the Capital Region of Denmark.

The other possible factor is the women themselves. They must be active when the local party associations decide who makes it to the electoral lists. In this connection, the question could be if there are systematic differences in the conditions that men and women are subject to when they want to run for local office. As women still spend more hours taking care of the home than their husbands – and as most local politicians work full time– one can imagine that the combination of family, job, and the role of free-time local councillor might be more difficult for women to juggle than for men. It is of course difficult to change the gender roles in Danish families from the outside. But one could ask if it would be difficult to change the conditions surrounding the evening job as local councillor. For instance, it has been established that in a number of coun-
tries where the position of member of the national parliament has become a full time job, women are better represented on the national level than in local politics (Kjær 2010b). This is actually also the case in Denmark where the percentage of female MPs is 38.9.

Secondly, one could try to change the attitude of the electorate towards the gender issue. During the latest elections, we have seen various attempts at increasing the focus on gender. Not least among these is the fact that the simple argument of fairness has been advanced again and again. When women constitute half the population, it is unfair that they do not constitute half of the local politicians. It might be time to take this argument one step further and try to show the electorate what they miss by not having enough focus on gender and by not having a sufficiently high number of women in municipal politics. What are the representational advantages of a higher degree of reflection of the gender issue? It might be the case that some voters consider the geographical representation as more important than having more women on the municipal council because they imagine it is important to have someone from the village who can speak in their favour on the municipal council when a new school structure is being discussed or a new policy for the development of the villages in the municipality is being drawn up. But maybe there are really good arguments for including more women; maybe they could do the representative work differently (Philips 1995, Mansbridge 1999). If so, those arguments should be identified, exemplified and communicated. It will surely not be an easy task and it might be the reason why it has not previously been undertaken in a serious manner. On the other hand, those who are impatient must act: If the rate of increase from the first 100 years continues, an equal representation of the genders in Danish municipal councils will not happen until the 2069 elections!

References


