Gendered Segregation in Danish Standing Parliamentary Committees 1990-2015

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Introduction

The decade of the 2010s is characterised as a European “suffragette moment” owing to celebrations of centenaries of women’s parliamentary enfranchisement in Norway (2013), Denmark (2015), Austria, Germany and Great Britain (2018), the Netherlands (2019) and Sweden (2021). Winning the vote meant overcoming traditional norms that varied from culture to culture but nearly always excluded women from politics (Inglehart/Norris/Welzel 2002, 321). Denmark was among the first countries to achieve female enfranchisement to municipalities (1908) and to the national parliament (1915), thereby gaining a leading status in terms of political gender equality, women’s rights and citizenship. 100 years later, the Danish case gives grounds for reflections on gender balance, horizontal and vertical gender segregation of parliamentary politics, and the positions occupied by women in national parliaments and power. The case contributes to a debate about “the next step” as it illustrates that the right to vote and to be elected is not sufficient to promote broad political representation – even in a society that considers itself relatively equal in terms of gender.

In the following, I focus on representation in parliamentary core positions: women’s and men’s committee membership and their tenancy as committee chairs and vice-chairs in the Danish parliament, the Folketing. In other words, I examine the horizontal and the vertical gendered segregation of standing committees over 25 years (1990-2015). The fact that standing committees are influential motivates a comprehensive analysis of changes over time (Wängnerud 2015, 62).

Parliamentary committees are often described as the “epicentre of parliamentary influence” (Murray/Sénac 2018, 310) and as important for efficient law-making and oppositional control (Hansen 2010). They are a crucial resource in the legislative system. Moreover, committee positions constitute a stepping stone in individual parliamentarians’ (MPs’) political careers as they gain visibility and expertise in specific policy areas (Pansardi/Vercesi 2017, 63). Analyses of women and men in parliamentary committees draw a critical picture of gender segregation in different committees and expose a tendency to assign committee posts along traditional gender lines. For the Danish case, two studies found a horizontal and vertical segregation in standing parliamentary committees (Refsgaard 1990) and in committees in local municipalities (Baekgaard/Kjaer 2012). Sweden displays a decline in horizontal and vertical segregation in parliamentary committees (Bolzendahl 2014; Wängnerud 2009; 2015).

This article analyses the proportion of female and male MPs in standing Danish parliamentary committees based on an explorative study. It discusses two questions “100 years after enfranchisement” in the Danish context, where almost 40% of MPs...
are female: (1) What is the gendered distribution of seats and chairs in Danish parliamentary committees over a 25-year period? (2) What can explain these gender patterns? The analysis does not consider the prestige of the different parliamentary committees or the seniority of the individual MPs, their party affiliation, or individual preferences in terms of committee membership.

The gendered segregation of parliamentary committees is defined as follows. Vertical division of labour concerns men’s and women’s positions in political hierarchies; horizontal division of labour concerns the various policy areas in which women and men work (Raaum 1995, 31-32; Dahlerup/Leyennar 2013).

The article proceeds as follows. I first illustrate the Nordic context as a background for the Danish case. Then, I review the literature and the theoretical approaches that are relevant for understanding the analysis. Next, I present the methodological framework and my empirical findings. In the final section, I discuss the findings.

The Danish Case in a Nordic Context

Internationally, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) are often considered a homogenous region with a high degree of political gender equality. While, indeed, this seems to be true in general terms, a closer look reveals distinct differences (Bergqvist et al. 1999). One common characteristic is that women’s entrance into politics is a post-war phenomenon that has changed women’s relationship to democracy, power and influence as well as the entire political landscape (Karvonen/Selle 1995). In the early 1970s, women were virtually absent from Scandinavian politics, but a decade later, their political presence was very apparent (Raaum 1995, 25). The Nordic countries became the first region in the world to pass 30%, which is considered a major threshold (Bergqvist et al. 1999; Dahlerup 2018, 190). However, the pace and direction of gender equality and women’s representation in Nordic politics differ in the individual countries. According to Nordic gender research, being democratically elected as an MP constitutes the main channel of influence for women in the Nordic countries (Bergqvist et al. 1999; Dahlerup 1988; Fiig 2009; Hernes 1987; Raaum 1995; Skjeie 1992; Togeby 1995). The analysis of women’s mobilisation, participation and representation in politics points to a range of connected background factors, such as demographic changes, growth of women’s resources, government policies, and the influence of the women’s movement (Karvonen/Selle 1995). Furthermore, high levels of economic development correlate positively with a high number of elected women (Wängnerud 2009, 56).

The picture of women in elite positions in the Nordic countries is not all rosy. Among the obstacles to female politicians are hostile reactions to women, working conditions that are incompatible with family responsibilities, and the existence of male-dominated networks (Wängnerud 2009, 60; Celis/Lovenduski 2018). This resonates with the fact that female Swedish MPs are less satisfied than their male colleagues with the working conditions in parliamentary party groups (Wängnerud 2015, 78).