

# From a Collective Women's Project to Individualized Gender Identities: Feminism, Women's Movements, and Gender Studies in Denmark

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## ABSTRACT

Andreassen gives a history of feminism and women's studies in Denmark from 1960-2003. By connecting academic research to developments of the women's movement and to the political and social context, she shows how the field has developed from a collective women's project to focusing on individual gender identities.

## RÉSUMÉ

Andreassen donne un historique du féminisme et de l'étude des femmes au Danemark de 1960 à 2003. En faisant le lien entre la recherche académique au développement du mouvement des femmes et au contexte politique et social, elle démontre comment le domaine a évolué du projet collectif de femmes à la concentration sur les identités individuelles entre les sexes.

How would feminism and women's studies develop if there was no linguistic difference between the words "sex" and "gender"? In this article I will give you one answer to that question. The article is a history of feminism, women's and gender studies in Denmark from the 1960s to the present. Feminism and women's studies in the western world have several similarities, which we tend to focus on when we generalise about the field, but there are also many distinctions - some caused by linguistic, others by societal and historical differences. This article throws light on a field of western feminism which is seldom described in English, but which nevertheless is valuable for anyone who wishes to get a more nuanced understanding of western feminism or of feminism in Scandinavia. The article connects academic research and developments in the fields of women's and gender studies to development of the women's movements, as well as to the larger political and social societal context, because, as the article will illustrate, there have been clear connections between the Danish academic feminist environment and the Danish women's movement, and the two areas have continuously influenced each other. I do apologise for the generalisation and stereotyping I necessarily have to make in order to inform you about this large field in such a limited space.

This article briefly compares feminism and women's and gender studies in Denmark and North America, and for that purpose it might be interesting to introduce some linguistic differences between the English and Danish languages. The English concepts of "sex" and "gender," which have been of great importance in the field of gender and women's studies in Northern America, do not exist in Danish. The differentiation between the two does

not exist, because they both translate to the same word *kon*. In other words, there is only one word for sex and gender. Also, the Danish word for "equality" is the same as that for "sameness." *Lighed* translates as equality, sameness, likeness, and similarity.

To put this in a historical perspective, it might be useful to know that the women's movement in Denmark dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the movement argued, among others things, for female suffrage, which was achieved in 1915. Denmark, together with the rest of Scandinavia, has had for decades the world's highest rates of women employed outside their homes, and one of the world's highest representation of women in parliaments and governing institutions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of social science and humanities research at universities in Scandinavia was Marxist or influenced by Marxism. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, areas such as social history, labour history, and women's history emerged as fields of study, and from the early 1980s, these fields were institutionalised by the emergence of various centres and institutes for women's studies. During this period, courses on women's history and women in literature began to be offered in the traditional history and social science departments. The combination of Marxism, social and labour history, and women's history resulted in a large amount of work on working class women's lives and history; in other words, in feminist history from the bottom up. The Danish Karen Syberg and Signe Arnfred's book *Kvindeundertrykkelsens specifikke karakter under kapitalismen* (1973), (the title translates as *The Specific Character of Women's Oppression Under Capitalism*, and

is a collection of texts written and assembled for a Nordic conference held in the summer of 1973),<sup>1</sup> is a typical example of the early work and of the understanding of women's studies and women's oppression. The German Ulrike Prokop's *Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang* (1976), (which could be translated as *Patterns in Women's Life* or as *Women's Life Situations*), introduced the concept of female productive forces.<sup>2</sup> This concept, as well as the book's combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis, was very influential for the new Danish field of women's studies and women's history. In the next decade, amazing works such as *Kvindfolk: En danmarkshistorie fra 1600 til 1980* (1984) (*Womenfolk: A History of Denmark from 1600 to 1980*) were published.<sup>3</sup> This two volume work is basically an attempt to rewrite history with women at the centre of the major narrative. It was written by a "writers' collective."<sup>4</sup> The introduction of the book declares that "This women's history is about women's lives through centuries, about daily life with work, childrearing, struggle for survival, hardship, celebration, and community."<sup>5</sup> This illustrates well the focus and perception of women's history in this period. Later in the introduction, it is argued that, "Women's lives were, are, and will continue to be, almost limitless in diversity, and a diverse group of authors has been an important precondition for the production of the books. The books are written by 25 women from various backgrounds...."<sup>6</sup> So, quite early, we witness an academic awareness and effort not to essentialize the category of women, and it seems like producing work collectively with people of diverse backgrounds was one way of trying to represent diversity.

During the 1970s, Denmark also saw the emergence of labour museums and women's museums, and several women's activities, such as women's films, literature, bands, and festivals were initiated. There was a close connection and overlap between the university academic environment and this female grassroots environment. The women's movement in 1970s, called the *Redstockings* (*Rødstrømperne*) in Denmark - with a reclaiming of the name *Bluestocking*, which was used negatively about educated and strong-minded women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, combined with the colour red as a symbol of the revolution - received considerable public attention in its fight for equal wages, right to abortion, and fight for social justice. The movement was closely connected with socialist and Marxist ideas exemplified in the famous and often used slogan: "No women's struggle - without class struggle - no class struggle without women's struggle."<sup>7</sup> This slogan was repeatedly used and has to be understood in order to comprehend the women's movement in Denmark. It was not an international slogan, and cannot really be translated, even though I have tried to here. The slogan embodies the movement's strategies, its understanding of the reasons behind women's oppression, and its ideals for the future. The Danish women's movement was not struggling to have women

enter the present system or have female representatives in the present power positions; the movement's goal was a revolutionary change of society: The end was not women's equality but women's emancipation.<sup>8</sup> This goal might be linked to the linguistics mentioned in the beginning of the article. Since the Danish word for "equality" is the same as the word for "sameness" or "similarity," simple equality with men would linguistically imply being the same as men, that is, operating within the existing oppressive structures. The goal therefore, obviously, had to become emancipation, which implied forming a different society where diversity was valued and existing hierarchies broken down.

I will explain further developments in these movements and in the academic fields with reference to Janne Kæmpe's interesting analysis (2002).<sup>9</sup> Kæmpe has looked at the development of the book *Kvinde kend din krop - en håndbog*, which translates as *Woman, Know Your Body - A Handbook*. The book can be described as a Danish feminist handbook on women, feminism, the body, and women's sexuality. The book is known and/or owned by almost every woman, who has, at some point in her life, been concerned with women's rights or women's sexuality. It was written by a group of diverse feminist scholars and feminist medical experts, and is therefore a good illustrator of the feminist academic discourse. The book was first published in 1975, then re-written and re-published in 1983, 1992, and 2001.<sup>10</sup> The changes in the discourse are therefore visible in these newer and rewritten editions. The first two editions were published by a so-called "labouring collective," whereas the last two editions were published by "authors and contributors." In the 1975 edition, women are described as oppressed and as victims of the patriarchal society; they are "doubly oppressed as women and as labourers." The oppression of women is caused by various social myths that constitute women and are constructed with the sole purpose of oppressing women. An illustration of this is the following citation describing society's myth about menopausal women: "A menopausal women is called hysteric, nervous, climacteric. She needs hormones, she needs medical scientific help - and tranquilizing drugs. She is the one with whom something is wrong - that is what the doctors say."<sup>11</sup>

This example is an illustration of how society turns "natural" biological processes such as menopause, into illnesses, and the 1975 version of the book is constantly explaining how women, in the eyes of society, are constructed as ill, passive, unclean, unstable. The book also argues that women themselves, who have internalised these societal views, are experiencing themselves and their biological processes and sexuality as negative. The reason behind the book's repeated descriptions of these myths is that the book's agenda is to inform women that these myths, and not biological facts, are controlling their lives. The suggested way to break away from these myths is to become aware of them and of the fact that a woman's problems are not private and isolated. The book functions as a tool in this

awareness process. Women are encouraged to form consciousness-raising groups based on another famous slogan, "the personal is political." The publishing of *Woman Know Your Body* took place at a time when the women's movement was strong, very active, and engaged in making the personal political. In the academic field of women's studies, the motto for research and publishing was "visibility": The agenda was to describe women's personal, and previously invisible, lives to make women visible. Research areas such as working class women, their jobs, their families, gendered division of labour, and gendered wages became key areas for investigation in order to make women more visible.

With the 1983-edition of *Woman Know Your Body*, we witness a change in the book. Previously, the focus was on how the patriarchal society defined women; in 1983 the focus was on how women define themselves. The idea and definition of women, as described by the book, are based on the concept of a specific female nature, which all women possess, and which the book encourages them to find. This nature, which is highly celebrated, seems almost static. Women's inner nature is seen as the key to a woman's happiness and harmony, which is described as the final goal. In order to find one's inner nature, one must listen to oneself and explore one's own potential, as it says in the 1983-edition: "Make your own bread, grow your own vegetables, make your own ground beef. It takes a lot of time, but this time is time for yourself, time for introspection in an important process of life."<sup>12</sup> Women are not encouraged to return to traditional gender roles. To interpret the 1983-edition of *Woman Know Your Body* as an agitator for women's return to the kitchen is a misunderstanding of the book; women are encouraged to embrace certain so-called female activities including making bread and being in harmony with nature and to introduce these qualities to the family life as well as to the working place. Women are described as being different but also as all possessing wonderful positive resources, which they must find and activate. The academic research in the second half of the 1980s shifted focus from the previous view of women as victims of capitalism and patriarchy, to a focus on women as activating agency, and new areas of research were embraced, including biographies of individual women and women in organisations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Danish mass media has collectively declared the women's movements dead from the mid-1980s. In the public discourse, this death has been explained by arguing that since women now have received equality with men (!), there is no longer a need for the movements. According to Danish professor of women's studies and political science, Drude Dahlerup, at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, the decrease in the women's movement from the second half of the 1980s was connected with the general decline in left politics and the dominance of the new neo-liberal discourse. Dahlerup argues, interestingly, that despite the

1980s embrace and focus on special female qualities, neither the women's movement nor feminist scholars can be seen as advocating a static or natural view of women. She says that the frequent portrayal of the women's movement and feminism as divided between feminists who argue that men and women are fundamentally the same and feminists who argue that men and women are fundamentally different is a misunderstanding of the feminist project in Denmark, because the internal debate within the women's movements has never been an either-or debate, nor even a central issue for these movements. The main debate among Danish feminists has always been about whether women should rebel or adapt, and Marxism was always more influential than ideas about biological differences.<sup>13</sup> The lack of this debate in Denmark compared to North America might be connected to the linguistic differences between the two places. If one does not operate with the verbal distinction between sex and gender, then the discussion between biologists who argue that we are fundamentally different (sex) and constructivists who argue that our differences are constructed and we are potentially the same (gender) is not necessarily an obvious discussion or debate to have. Dahlerup also argues that Danish feminism cannot be understood in the traditional feminist division between Marxist feminists and radical feminists. Rather, the North American and European ideas, ideologies, and the general situation in Denmark were combinations of the two. The movement was not split between these but embodied both fractions.<sup>14</sup>

The decline of the women's movements in the 1980s resulted in academic research being less connected to the grassroots and to political struggle, and feminist research developed in the direction of an elitist academic profession. When the Berlin wall came down in 1989, and Eastern Europe to a large extent broke down economically and socially, the consequence for a large part of academia in Denmark was a similar break down. Scholars, who for years had based their work on Marxist theories, who had studied and been inspired by the progressive social and gender relations in Eastern European societies, saw their foundation disintegrate. The result was that the practice and research of history became theory-free. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, the majority of historians became concerned with empirically-founded history, and for a period the field of history seemed to be theory-dead or in theory denial. This environment left very little room for newer theories about gender influenced by post-structuralism and post-modernism, and the previous blooming of social and women's history was replaced by a return to political history and the study of individual people.

The third edition of *Woman, Know Your Body* from 1992 expresses the optimistic view that women now are almost fully liberated. Where the 1983-edition focused on defining women, the 1992-edition argues that women are who they choose to be. The focus is on women as

individuals and on their individual choices. Structures in society are no longer viewed as specifically limiting for women, but more as limiting for some women and some men, and these structures and barriers are possible to overcome - maybe with the help of a therapist. Traditional ideology is no longer an enemy, and the problems and structures are not gender specific, and therefore there are no longer simple collective solutions, but only individual solutions - which is good because there is also no longer a collective women's movement to support a collective liberation project.

The focus on both men and women corresponds to a larger change within the field of women's studies and feminism, which is explicitly illustrated in the change of naming of the academic field of women's studies to the "new" gender studies. Centres and institutes for women's studies changed their names to Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, or simply Centre for Gender Studies, in the early 1990s. In this period, an academic focus on masculinity studies also emerged, and the study of gender was conceived as including the study of women, men, and every gender in between.

In the latest edition of *Woman Know Your Body* from 2001 the political aspect is re-introduced, and similarities to the 1975-edition are clear. The introduction of the book states: "to know your body is both a personal and a political project."<sup>15</sup> Women are not described as "doubly oppressed" as in the 1975 edition, but instead as "doubly stressed" by managing both family life and career. Barriers in society are no longer caused by patriarchy but by culture, which, as we know, is everywhere. Not only men, but also women themselves, are active in the oppression of women. Women's liberation in 2001 becomes a project about being liberated from one's own and others' expectations. Because women, in theory, can do anything, they, in practice, feel they must do everything: be the perfect mother, lover, career woman, and so on. But, the book argues, these expectations must be overcome.

The project of liberating women, which underlines all four books, has changed from being a politically external project to an internal identity project, from a collective project common to all women to a personal project. In 2001, we witness a return to the political project but the project is keeping the individual approach.

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, we have seen a return to political gender history, or gender history with a political purpose, especially from younger scholars heavily influenced by international theories of gender and, especially, social constructivism. The reintroduction of the political aspect and the personal as political was kick-started by the publication of a Swedish anthology named *Fittstimm* from 1999, (which could translate as *Group or shoal of vaginas coming against you*; the anthology was translated to Danish in 1999 with the title *Fisseflokken*).<sup>16</sup> This is a well-written and well-argued

collection of essays by younger feminists who all write about gender constructions in contemporary Sweden and about how these are oppressive and limiting for them. The book was followed by the Danish *Pikstormerne*, (which translates as something like *Penises storming against you*),<sup>17</sup> and *Hvordan mand*, (which could translate as *How man*).<sup>18</sup> Both books contain essays written by younger men, who, from a similar social constructive point of view, write personal essays about how masculinity is constructed in contemporary Denmark and how this construction often is perceived as restricting for their lives. All three books were widely read and re-introduced feminism and discussions about gender and gender roles to the public agenda. In 2002 the Danish anthology *De røde sko*, (which translates as *The red shoes*) was published, which similarly carries out a social constructive approach but moves away from the personal perspective and contains essays on how gender is constructed in everything from the European Union to animal films. With those new books, we have witnessed a re-articulation of feminism in the public debate, which had been largely quiet during the 1990s, where the main voice carried out by the mass media was the constant reminder of the received gender equality in Denmark and the death of the women's movement.

If we look at the academic feminist project today, we see a political project which to a large extent is based on breaking down the myth of gender equality in Denmark. Social constructivism and discourse analysis are good tools in this deconstruction which illustrates how gender, and thereby limitations, are constructed. It is no longer a project advising people, and especially women, how they should live their lives, but rather a project trying to deconstruct reality. We cannot discuss how society should be before we know how it really is. So reality is being analysed, and discourses are being analysed. It is a project that also can be described as a fight against heteronormativity; a heteronormativity which is based on a fundamental belief in a female and male essence, and which sets limiting expectations for women (and men) in contemporary society. The project today is based on seeing the deconstruction of seemingly essential identities as a necessary precondition for reaching an adequate understanding of the various social relations where power is at play and where principles of liberation should be at play.

Gender studies in Denmark are still mainly a field dominated by women, even though more men have joined the field during the last decade. All centres and institutes for gender studies include more than one, and most more than two, genders in their definition of gender studies.

When comparing Danish feminism and academic gender research with Northern American feminism and research, one clear difference seems to be that Danish gender studies are less focused on including the well-known categories of race, class and sexuality are more post-modern in their serious denial of any essence. These categories are considered to function as legitimations of the

essential character of race, class and sexuality. Other factors that play a role in the avoidance of such categories are the abandonment of the academic class project after 1989 and the fewer people of colour in Danish academia - as well as in Denmark as a whole - compared to the USA and Canada to point out the importance of race analysis within gender studies.

Danish feminism has continuously been influenced by feminist texts written in English and German, and of course by Scandinavian feminist texts written in Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish. Danish feminism can be characterised as unique in the way that it developed in a historical and societal context where legal equality was granted early, where the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s was backed by strong left wing movements which influenced Danish society, and where the movement for several years was accompanied by social democratic governments that implemented several of the movement's wishes along with the construction of the welfare state. Unlike in North America and Southern Europe, the women's movements in Denmark did not witness a split

between radical feminism and socialist Marxist feminism. Single persons within the movement can be categorised as representing one or the other of these factions, but the Danish women's movement and women's studies scholars did not experience a conflict between, nor did they debate, these two ideological positions.

The current media in Denmark continuously try to argue that the "new" feminism in the twenty-first century, expressed in *Fittstim* and *De røde sko*, is a contrast to the "old" feminism from 1970s. This argument is one of the most repeated statements in the contemporary mass media's description of current Danish feminism. As shown through this article, however, this is not true! If there is a break between contemporary feminism and previous feminisms, it is between the 1980s' belief in an inner female nature and valuing of female characteristics, and present day feminists who argue that there is no such thing as a natural woman.

## ENDNOTES

1. Syberg, Karen & Signe Arnfred. *Kvindeundertrykkelsens specificikke karakter under kapitalismen*. Copenhagen: Nordisk sommeruniversitet. 1973.

2. Prokop, Ulrike. *Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang: von der Beschränktheit Strategien und der Unangemessenheit der Wünsche*. Frankfurt an Main: Suhrkamp. 1975.

3. Berg, Anne Margrete, Lis Frost & Anne Olsen, eds. *Kvindfolk. En danmarkshistorie fra 1600 til 1980*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal. 1984.

4. Ibid, list of authors, title page.

5. Ibid p. 9. The original Danish text says: "Denne kvindehistorie i to bind er en historie om kvinders liv gennem århundreder, om hverdagen med arbejde, børnepasning, kamp for dagen og vejen, slid og slæb, fest og fællesskab."

6. Ibid p. 10. The original Danish text says: "Kvindelivet var, er og vil fortsat være næsten grænseløst i sin mangfoldighed, og en vidtfavnende forfattergruppe har derfor været en væsentlig forudsætning for bøgernes tilblivelse. De er skrevet af 25 kvinder fra mange forskellige fag"

7. The original Danish slogan is: "Ingen kvindekamp uden klassekamp - ingen klassekamp uden kvindekamp".

8. Dahlerup, Drude. *Rødstrømperne. Den danske Rødstrømpebevægelses udvikling, nytænkning og gennemslag 1970-1985*, vol. 2, Copenhagen: Gyldendal. 1998. p. 93 ff. and p. 163 ff.

9. Kæmpe, Janne. "Fra det kollektive til det individuelle. *Kvinde kend din krop* anno 1975-2001," In: Skov, Leonora Christina (ed.). *De røde sko: Feminisme nu*. Aarhus: Tiderne Skifter. 2002, pp. 239-249. My description, including citations, of *Kvinde kend din krop* is based on and taken from this article.

10. Vinder, K. (ed.). *Kvinder kend din krop - en håndbog*, Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1975; Vinder, K. (ed.). *Kvinder kend din krop - en håndbog*, Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1983; Vinder, K. (ed.). *Kvinder kend din krop - en håndbog*, Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1992; Vinder, K. (ed.). *Kvinder kend din krop - en håndbog*, Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 2001.

11. The original Danish text says: "Kvinden kaldes hysterisk, nervøs, klimakteriel. Hun mangler hormoner, hun trænger til lægebehandling og beroligende stoffer. Det er hende, der er noget galt med det siger lægerne" (1975), cited after Kæmpe (2002), p. 241.

12. The original Danish text says: "Bag selv dit brod, rens selv dine grønsager og lav selv din fars. Det tager masser af tid, men det er tid til dig selv, tid til fordybelse i en vigtig livsproces" (1983), cited after Kæmpe (2002), p. 243.

13. Dahlerup, Drude. "Ambivalenser og strategiske valg. Om problemer i kvindebevægelsen og i feministisk teori omkring forskels- og lighedsbegreberne," Aalborg: GEP (The Research programme Gender, Empowerment and Politics), 2001. p. 13 ff.
14. Dahlerup, Drude. *Rødstrømperne. Den danske Rødstrømpebevægelses udvikling, nytænkning og gennemslag 1970-1985*, vol. 2, Copenhagen: Gyldendal. 1998. p. 96 ff.
15. The original Danish text says: "At kender sin krop er både et personligt og politisk projekt" (2001), cited after Kæmpe (2002), p. 246.
16. Skugge, Linda Norman, Olsson, Belinda & Zilg, Brita (ed.). *Fittstim*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget. 1999.
17. Sørensen, Niels Ulrik. *Pikstormerne*. Copenhagen: Information. 2000.
18. Holm, Adam, Bisgaard, Timme Munk and Thelle, Mikkel. *Hvordan mand*. Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter. 2000.

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