

Gender Equality as a Closed Case: A Survey among the Members of the 2015 Danish Parliament

Drude Dahlerup *

Despite almost unanimous adherence to the principle of gender equality in contemporary Denmark, a society with a long historical record of gender equality policies and almost 40 percent women in parliament, are there still divergences to be found among the members of parliament concerning gender equality principles and policies? This article argues that in order to identify underlying cleavages it is necessary to pose fundamental questions that go beyond the day-to-day disagreements on policy issues. Based on a new survey of the members of the Danish parliament, this study finds that the support for gender equality is not just a matter of lip service insofar as few MPs hold traditionalist views on women. However, the study reveals conflicting perceptions, left-right cleavages and gender gaps, sometimes also within the parties. A new discourse is identified, supported by a large minority that includes all of the male MPs from the four right-wing parties; this minority considers gender equality to be a ‘closed case’ – that is, as having by and large been achieved. This may provide clues to the puzzle of the stagnation in gender equality reforms in spite of the general support for ‘gender equality’. The article discusses the possible connection between the ‘closed case’ discourse, present neoliberal trends in society and the recent construction of gender equality as an ‘intrinsic Danish value’ – an argument familiar in other countries with a harsh debate over immigration.

Introduction

In democratic systems, parliamentarians are important actors, not only as lawmakers but also as participants in the public debate and as contributors to public opinion-making. The aim of this article is to identify divergences in parliamentary discourses on gender equality principles and policies in a society such as Denmark, where almost *everyone supports the principle of gender equality*. How well-founded is this alleged consensus on ‘gender equality’, and can we find substantial disagreements between female and male members of parliament (MPs) and between parties, pointing to different perceptions of what gender equality implies?

* Drude Dahlerup, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Sweden and Department of Social Science and Business, Roskilde University, Denmark. E-mail: drude.dahlerup@statsvet.su.se

At present, it is nearly impossible for any Danish politician to publicly denounce the principle of gender equality, and all party programmes include gender equality as a goal. However, contrary to the situation in neighbouring Sweden, where the majority of the political parties in their programmes have identified themselves as ‘feminists’ since the 1990s, the Danish political parties see this label as being too radical, with the Red Green Alliance the only exception (Dahlerup 2011). As a Nordic country, Denmark used to be among the global forerunners with regard to gender equality, but to the surprise of many international observers, *stagnation* has occurred during the last few decades with regard to gender equality reforms. Denmark has moved down on the Global Gender Gap Index and is now at number 19, while the other Nordic countries are placed at 1, 2, 3 and 4 (World Economic Forum 2017).

The literature on *gender gaps*, which is based on surveys among parliamentarians, has identified continuous differences between female and male politicians in terms of attitudes, priorities and policy promotion. Yet, the fluctuations over time and between countries underline the contextual nature of gender gaps (Teigen & Wängnerud 2009; Wängnerud 2009; Campbell et al. 2010; Swers 2016). Can we expect to find in the contemporary Danish parliament – with its almost unanimous acceptance of the principle of ‘gender equality’ and a little less than 40 percent women MPs – that gender today plays only a minor role? For some this is a long-term ideal and for others a sign that women politicians have adapted to the norms of male-dominated political institutions (Mansbridge 1999; Dahlerup 2018).

This article is based on a new survey among the members of the Danish parliament. It is argued that in order to identify current divisions, we need to look for more fundamental differences beyond conflicts over day-to-day policy issues. We study MP attitudes and policy promotion on gender equality politics with special emphasis on issues of women’s political (under-)representation and the lack of women in leadership – key issues in contemporary gender equality debates and central to politics and gender research. We analyse how Danish parliamentarians perceive gender equality as a goal, how far they believe we are from this goal and how they diagnose still existing inequalities. How engaged are they in promoting gender equality in their parliamentary work, and which gender equality policy instruments do they support – or detest?

The article is structured as follows. It begins by presenting an overview of the contemporary Danish political context. Then, the theoretical and methodological framework is outlined and the survey presented. The subsequent sections present the results of the survey, starting with two sections on the principles of gender (in)equality followed by sections on the MPs’ perceptions of women’s descriptive, substantial and symbolic

representation or under-representation (to be defined later). Before presenting the conclusions, the article looks more closely at the large minority in parliament that believes that gender equality has by and large been achieved— in this study, labelled the ‘closed case’ segment of parliament.

The Danish Political Context in a Nordic Perspective¹

After decades of feminist mobilization and gender equality reforms, *stagnation* concerning the promotion of gender equality policies has appeared in Denmark since the mid-1990s (Borchorst & Dahlerup 2003; Dahlerup 2013; Olsen 2014). In the previous period, the 1960s–1990s, in all of the Nordic countries, the goal of gender equality, which was based on the principle of the dual breadwinner and dual caregiver family, had gradually become widely accepted among politicians and the general population following the dramatic change in women’s position in society (Togebly 1994). The parallel expansion of the welfare state was seen as a prerequisite for gender equality. Simultaneously, women’s parliamentary representation rose, and the Nordic countries became the first region in the world to overcome the 30 percent threshold (Bergqvist et al.1999; Dahlerup 2018). In the Danish parliament, informal cross-party alliances between left- and right-wing feminist politicians had long existed, with the result that equality policies were usually passed by a large majority. Already, during the 1970s, the political parties, including most of the right-wing parties, subscribed to the goal of equality between men and women in their programmes (Dahlerup 1990, 2011).

Stagnation since the mid-1990s

The term ‘stagnation’ should, however, be understood in relation to the historically widespread belief in continuous progress towards full gender equality that has been found in the whole Nordic region (Skjeie & Teigen 2005; Dahlerup 2012). Several factors contributed to this stagnation in Denmark, such as the many referenda on the European Union, with four occurring in eight years (i.e., 1992, 1993, 1998 and 2000), which divided the feminist community between the ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ campaigns, and later the mounting controversies over immigration and the Muhammed cartoon crisis.

In a Nordic comparison from the 1990s, Danish MPs were the least supportive of a number of key gender equality proposals, and Lena Wängnerud (2000) pointed to a lack of epoch-making gender political events in Denmark, such as the first woman prime minister (Norway), the

first woman elected president (Iceland) and the influential feminist network in Sweden in the 1990s, the ‘Support Stockings’.

In his 2003 opening speech to parliament, the liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen for the first time criticized ‘oppressing family patterns’ among immigrants, but there was never any reference made to gender inequality among native Danes. The liberal government even removed the modest two weeks of reserved paternity leave for fathers, which had been introduced earlier by the Social Democrats.

Some assertive right-wing publicists and a small number of men’s groups argued that gender equality had gone too far. Hans Bonde, a university professor, argued in a widely cited book that there has been a move ‘*from feminism to favouritism*’, since men today are the disfavoured (Bonde 2013). This might not be a completely new point of view, but the general conservative and neoliberal turn in Danish politics no doubt gave it a more prominent role in the public debate; however, it was always met with immediate response from feminist groups. In parliament, the parties on the left criticized the right-wing governments of 2001–11 for their lack of gender equality initiatives, stressing that ‘there is no gender equality in Denmark’ (Socialdemokratiet 2003).

The First Woman Prime Minister

Consequently, expectations were high in 2011, when Helle Thorning-Schmidt, leader of the Social Democratic Party, became Denmark’s first female prime minister. Her minority government initially consisted of the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals and the Socialist People’s Party (see Appendix), but lost the subsequent election in 2015 when the traditional Liberal Party (Venstre) took over again. The platform of the Thorning-Schmidt government included an entire section on ‘equality between men and women’, in which a number of initiatives were announced. Most of these were later dropped, including the earmarking of three months of paid parental leave for fathers, which had been a central theme in the public debate and a measure that has been adopted in all of the other Nordic countries.² While Sweden, later joined by Norway, criminalized the buying of sex, the promise to act on this issue was also dropped. While Norway introduced a 40–60 percent gender quota for private and public company boards, the Danish solution was a law that only recommended that companies take some action (‘soft quotas’). The prime minister was heavily criticized by feminists and the left for diverging from her promises, probably out of fear of losing even more votes to the right-wing, anti-immigration Danish People’s Party (DF). This survey asked MPs about the symbolic value of having the first female prime minister.

A 'Danish Value'

A new discourse of gender equality as a national 'Danish value' was introduced by the Danish People's Party. This seems to be a paradox, because of the party's and its predecessor, the Progress Party's long record of being critical of and voting against most gender equality legislation (Dahlerup 1990; data from the GRIP project). Now DF argues:

Full and complete gender equality for women in Danish social and economic life is the best guarantee for a well-functioning and complete society, and fundamentally in accordance with the Danish values. (2009 DF Party programme)

According to the party, however, these values are under threat by immigrants, 'especially from Islamic countries'. Gender equality, expressed as a Danish value, was soon adopted by all larger parties and has even become part of the official so-called 'Denmark Canon'³ as a result of an Internet referendum with 320,000 participants organized by the Ministry of Culture. Equality between women and men (*kønsligestilling*) is now one of the ten most important Danish values, alongside, for instance, 'the Christian heritage', 'the Danish language' and 'liberality/tolerance'. In their programmatic writings about gender equality, many Danish parties make references to gender inequality in immigrant communities (Siim & Meret 2013).

Denmark is the libertarian of the North. Effective gender equality instruments such as gender quotas have always been very unpopular in Denmark, even among the left-wing parties. However, Denmark has been a forerunner in the Nordic area as well as globally on libertarian issues such as legalizing same-sex marriage and single women's right to insemination (Borchorst & Siim 2008; Dahlerup 2013).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The Vague Concept of Gender Equality

'Per se the word gender equality (*ligestilling*) has no meaning', stated the first Danish government Commission on Women bluntly (Kvindekommisionen 1972, 73). Nevertheless, a new policy area was developed soon after in all the Nordic countries under the label of 'gender equality'. Today, gender equality had become an official goal of the United Nations. The vagueness seems to be a prerequisite for the widespread support in principle for gender equality (Dahlerup 2018).

Even today 'gender equality' is an open term. Lombardo et al. (2009) have identified processes of reduction, amplification, shifting and freezing of the meaning of gender equality policies. Nordic gender research has

exposed a general ambiguity around this policy field – not least in Denmark (Bergqvist et al. 1999; Borchorst & Dahlerup 2003; Olsen 2014).

There is a need to go beyond the ‘we are all for gender equality’ discourse. Following Carol Bacchi (2005), this article uses the concept of discourse in two distinct ways. The main analytical focus is on what Bacchi calls ‘discourse analysis’ or analysis of the construction of meaning in a text, including speeches and interviews – in this case: through a survey. In contrast, ‘analysis of discourse’ is used to identify more general, institutionally supported and culturally dominant patterns of meanings.⁴

Informed by feminist political theory as well as research on framing gender equality policies, including the author’s own research, this study poses some fundamental questions to the Danish parliamentarians concerning their perceptions of gender (in)equality (Borchorst & Dahlerup 2003; Goertz & Mazur 2008; Lombardo et al 2009; Dahlerup 2011). ‘Perception’ is here defined as the way in which something is regarded, understood or interpreted. In analysing the MPs’ perceptions on issues concerning *women’s political representation* and *women as leaders*, we make use of the widely used distinction in politics and gender research between women’s descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, inspired by, although not identical to, Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) well-known categorization of different types of representation. These concepts are defined in the individual sections.

A Closed Case?

For the first time in a Nordic MP survey, Danish MPs were asked if gender equality in their understanding has by and large been achieved.⁵ With an expression borrowed from detective novels, this is labelled ‘the closed case’ position. It is suggested that the answer to this fundamental question, known from the public debate, is linked to what the parliamentarians understand as gender (in)equality, their readiness to work for gender equality reforms and their choice of policy instruments. After having identified a relatively large closed case segment in the parliament, special attention is given to the perceptions of this segment throughout the article. The next analytical step is to examine divergences between male and female MPs.

Still Gender Gaps in Parliament?

The literature on *gender gaps* has identified differences between women and men among voters, among various elites or among parliamentarians in terms of party preferences (only voters), political attitudes, priorities or policy promotion. The found fluctuations over time obviously underline the contextual nature of gender gaps (Thomas 1994; Karvonen & Selle

1995; Norris 1998; Teigen & Wängnerud 2009; Campbell et al. 2010; Dittmar 2015; Wängnerud 2015).

All parliamentary surveys on gender equality policies find that party affiliation is an important factor: Leftist parties are in general more supportive of gender equality policies than right-wing parties. Yet, the point of departure of this article is that gender plays an independent role, even in relation to party cleavages. The first reason for this is because differences between female and male MPs can be found within the same party or party bloc – not least in relation to gender equality policies. The second reason is because the left parties' more progressive gender equality profile in most historical cases stems from active interventions by feminist *women* within the left parties. The final reason is because left parties in general have a higher share of women MPs than do right-wing parties.

The question of whether gender gaps in the Nordic parliaments will tend to diminish or increase following the enhanced political representation of women, in the light of the general societal changes, has been discussed in the literature. Unfortunately, longitudinal data are limited (Karvonen & Selle 1995; Wängnerud 2015). No linear relationship between the number of women and the adoption of 'women-friendly' policies has been found since so many other factors intervene (Öhberg & Wängnerud 2013; Wängnerud 2015). Additionally, critical mass theory, which states that it takes a certain proportion, a tipping point of, for example, 30 percent, of women MPs, to make a difference, has been found to be a myth, albeit a powerful one (Dahlerup 2014). The reactions of male MPs could be rapprochement or quite the opposite. According to Kokkonen and Wängnerud (2017, 213), a new focus on male politicians shows the need for analysing a possible 'reverse' tipping point.

A Masculinist Reaction?

For too long, gender gap research both on voters and parliamentarians has focused predominantly on women when explaining the gap (women's greater support for the welfare state, women's interests). However, we need an equally strong focus on male voters and parliamentarians, especially today when we see anti-feminism in social media and hate speech directed particularly against women in powerful positions during electoral campaigns alongside anti-immigration discourses ('trumpism').

Kokkonen and Wängnerud (2017, 200) test three strands of research found in the literature on gender gaps among parliamentarians: (1) the spillover effect: the view that a growing presence of women will make male politicians more supportive of gender equality; (2) a null effect; and (3) a negative effect: the view that group-threat mechanisms make male politicians less supportive of gender equality as the proportion of women

increases. Kokkonen and Wängnerud (2017, 212–13) are reluctant to assume the group-threat theory as the explanation of their empirical findings, and instead adhere to a theory of (increased?) cost for men in engaging in gender equality policies.

Thus, increasing conflicts may be underway maybe not just as a reaction to sheer numbers, but to greater societal changes. Campbell et al. (2010) found growing, rather than diminishing, polarization over gender equality among British voters and among MPs, depending, however, on the issue. This discussion is highly relevant in relation to the reactions entrenched in the closed case segment in the Danish parliament.

In sum, within the limits of a survey conducted at a single point in time, this study analyses how well-founded the alleged consensus on ‘gender equality’ is, and whether we can find substantial disagreements between female and male MPs (gender gaps) and between parties in the present Danish parliament. In comparing the *sizes* of the gender gaps – an understudied theme – we expect to find that the gender gaps increase when we go from general perceptions to active engagement and further to the choice of policy instruments because of the increasing costs of involvement and increased party conflicts, especially for male right-wing politicians, in the move from principles to actual policy making (Swers 2016).

The Survey

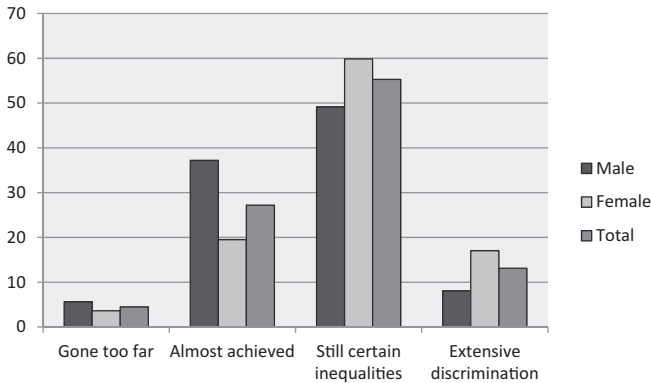
The survey of the 179 members of the Danish parliament (2015 MP survey DK) was conducted by the author from the end of 2014 to the beginning of 2015 in the form of a mail survey, and as part of the research project ‘The Political Gender Equality Regime in Denmark (GRIP)’. The questionnaire is available online at: <http://www.drudedahlerup.com/publications>. The response rate was slightly lower than 60 percent. All of the figures in this article are weighted by party and gender. Because of the lack of longitudinal data (the previous parliamentary surveys from 1994 and 2008 provided only a few questions on gender equality in contrast to the 2015 survey), this study focuses on the Danish parliament that was elected in 2011.⁶

To establish a common language, a gender gap is considered to be ‘small’ when it is fewer than 15 percentage points, ‘considerable’ when it is between 15 and 30 percentage points and ‘huge’ when it exceeds 30 percentage points. Because of small Ns, even considerable gender gaps might in some cases not be statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (Chi² test).

General State of Gender Equality

The most basic question of relevance to policy making on gender equality is clearly to what extent do parliamentarians believe that we still have a

Figure 1. ‘In Your Opinion, has Gender Equality been Achieved in Denmark Today?’ Members of the Danish Parliament. Total and Gender (%).



Notes: 2015 MP survey DK, Question 14. Posed as alternatives.

problem of gender inequality. This question is new in Danish and Nordic parliamentary surveys, but is well-known from the public debate. Figure 1 shows that the greatest support among Danish MPs (55 percent) was for the position that there are still certain gender inequalities in several important areas in society; there was a small gender gap – 60 percent of the female MPs in contrast to 49 percent of the male MPs agreed with this position. The next position, extensive discrimination, is the one that is closest to the general feminist critique of patriarchal society. This is a minority position, supported by 13 percent, and more women than men. Taken together, this implies that two-thirds (68 percent) of the MPs in the Danish parliament want change away from present gender inequalities/discrimination.

On the other hand, Figure 1 shows that a remarkable number of the parliamentarians (27 percent) opt for the position that ‘gender equality has by and large been achieved’; for this position there was a considerable gender gap with twice as many men as women agreeing with it.⁷ That gender equality ‘has gone too far’ – a well-known statement from the public debate – is clearly a minority position in the Danish parliament and was supported by only 5 percent of MPs, among them more male than female MPs. In the debate, some would call the gone-too-far position anti-feminist or a sign of backlash. If we add the last two mentioned positions,⁸ they represent what in this article is being labelled ‘gender equality as a closed case’, which is supported by one-third of the MPs – a rather high proportion in a society where ‘gender equality’ is the official goal of the polity. The interpretation is that for most of the MPs within this group, no

further gender equality reforms are needed – an interpretation that is confirmed by the following analyses and indicates quite different understandings of what gender equality implies.⁹

The closed case position is probably not an exclusively Danish phenomenon, but would probably be political suicide for most Swedish politicians (Dahlerup 2011). This construction provides clues to the *puzzle* of how a party like the DF, which despite supporting the principle of gender equality, continues to vote against most gender equality reforms: Because gender equality is seen as having by and large been achieved (for native Danes, that is).

There is also a significant division between the political parties (not shown here), with the right-wing parties predominantly supporting the closed case position, while the left-wing parties tends to support the position that gender equality has not yet been achieved in Denmark. There is no statistically significant difference between male and female MPs. However, analysing the interplay between gender and party yields the remarkable result that *none* of the *male* MPs from the four right-wing parties believe that we still have problems of gender inequality in Danish society; they all belong to the closed case segment. However, the closed case segment also includes some left-wing, mostly male, MPs. On the other hand, the few right-wing MPs who believe that inequalities still exist are *all women MPs*. This indicates that there are still some women's rights advocates within the right-wing parties in Denmark.

A Parliament with Few Traditionalists

Some might argue that this closed case position in parliament is not new at all but is simply a cover for traditional patriarchal attitudes. However, contemporary discourses are radically different from discourses on similar topics in Denmark just half a century ago and from those discourses in many other countries, which I experience as a global consultant on women's political empowerment. The contemporary Danish parliament has only a few traditionalists, as Table 1 demonstrates. The 'traditionalist view' is defined here as the position that women belong in the home, that men are in general more suitable and qualified to be leaders, and that women's work is less valuable than that of men. Traditionalists accuse feminism of destroying the family by breaking down traditional gender roles.

Table 1 shows some issues gathered from different sections of the questionnaire on which there is limited disagreement among Danish MPs. Surveys commonly look for differences and, consequently, we have only limited knowledge about shared beliefs. Table 1 demonstrates almost unanimous agreement on the statement that women and men function

Table 1. Issues on which There is a High Level of Consensus among Danish MPs. Total and by Gender (%)

	Women	Men	Gender gap (W-M)	Total
Women and men function equally well as political leaders	92	100	-8	96
No limits on the right to free abortion	93	91	2	92
The composition of parliament shall mirror the principal groups in society	90	79	11	85

Notes: 2015 MP survey DK, extracts from Questions 7, 10 and 18. 'Very important' and 'Important' responses. The 'Do not know' answers take the bulk of the rest.

equally well as political leaders, as opposed to the alternatives that men or women are better leaders; the latter was chosen by a few of the female MPs. This result stands in sharp contrast to the traditionalist view, which the respondents were no doubt fully aware of when answering this question.

Some 92 percent of the MPs are against limits to the right to free abortion, which has been a non-issue in Danish politics since the adoption of the law in 1973. Four-fifths (85 percent) support the idea that the social composition of parliament should mirror the population, which is a high level of support yet not as high as on the two first questions. The agreement between female and male MPs is high (no statistical significant differences). Additionally, among the cold case groups a majority, but now only 65 percent, supports the mirror principle. Thus, general support for the principle of gender equality is not just a matter of lip service but is grounded in the modern Danish society, even if there are disagreements over the interpretation of the principle of (in)equality.

Diagnoses of the Problem of Inequality

Why are women under-represented in top positions in society? The answer to this fundamental gender equality problem has consequences for the choice of strategy. If women's under-representation is seen primarily as a result of women's lack of resources, competence or political interest, then capacity-building programmes is the natural response. This is the course followed by so many international donor agencies in the Global South. If, in contrast, discrimination, barriers and various mechanisms that exclude women (and other under-represented groups) are understood to be the main reason for under-representation, then reform of the institutions is a logical remedy, especially reforms of the non-inclusive

Table 2. The Diagnosis of Women's Under-representation. Total and by Gender (%)

	Women	Men	Gender gap (W-M)	Total
<i>Focus on women</i>				
Too few women apply for these positions	76	78	-2	77
More women than men have problems handling the pressure that being a leader implies	17	9	8	14
Women don't have the necessary competences	7	4	3	6
<i>Focus on structural barrier</i>				
Recruitment often takes place within unofficial networks**	89	65	24	79
Many men have problems cooperating with female leaders	17	20	-3	18
Recruitment of women is not given priority*	70	47	23	60
Female applicants are passed over in recruitment	43	28	15	36

Notes: 2015 MP survey DK, Q 9: 'Based on your experience, which are the most important reasons behind the fact that there are fewer women than men in top positions in society?' Percentage answering 'Very important' and 'Important'. The categorization is added here, while the questions were mixed in the questionnaire. ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

recruitment processes in the political parties, for instance, by anti-discrimination legislation or the use of gender quotas (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2005).

Table 2 shows that the structural barrier explanations for women's under-representation in top positions in general got much more support among the parliamentarians than explanations that focus on women's shortcomings and blaming women themselves – the supply-side arguments. An overwhelming majority of both male and female MPs reject the explanation that women have more problems handling a leadership position than men. The traditionalist degradation of women as leaders is not represented in the Danish parliament, as we observed in Table 1. However, three-quarters of both male and female MPs agree that too few women apply for top positions, which is a well-known statistical fact, although supply is, of course, not independent of demand.

We find a considerable and statistically significant gender gap concerning those structural explanations claiming that recruitment occurs within unofficial networks ('old boys' networks') and that recruitment of women is not given priority. In addition, MPs from the left see structural explanations as more important than MPs on the right do, but a gender gap remains within both party blocs. It seems logical that we also found *huge* variation between the closed case segment and those who believe that gender inequalities still exist in Denmark. It is a part of the patchwork of contemporary parliamentary discourse that only 18 percent of Danish MPs (almost as few women as men) blame *men* for having problems

cooperating with women. In general, blaming men as a group for the discrimination of women is not a popular view in Denmark.

In a comparative study of Swedish and Norwegian gender equality cultures among various elites based on similar questions, Teigen and Wängnerud (2009, 23, 32) label what in Table 2 is called ‘women’s shortcomings’ as examples of ‘liberal feminism’, while they label the second category, the structural barrier explanations, as examples of ‘radical feminism’; the first is more prevalent in Norway, while the latter is more prevalent in Sweden. However, it seems misleading to use these conceptions of various feminist ideologies (‘feminisms’) in this context. Pointing to discrimination and structural barriers, instead of women’s alleged lack of qualifications, is common for all variants of feminism today, not just ‘radical’ feminism, and the demand for reform of the institutions because of their lack of inclusiveness is supported by international declarations, including the seminal UN Platform for Action, agreed in Beijing in 1995. The differences found between the three Nordic countries may be a consequence of the variation in the size of the closed case segment, which tends to reject this new international focus on embedded barriers. This should not, however, be interpreted as the traditionalist view that women lack competence, but rather as the neoliberal perception that the lack of women in leadership positions is the result of *women’s own choices* and consequently not a gender equality problem that needs political intervention.

Descriptive Representation of Women

We now turn to the MPs’ perceptions of more specific issues concerning women’s political representation: descriptive (numerical) (under-)representation, and substantive and symbolic representation. Denmark used to be in the forefront, but recent stagnation in the expected continuous increase in women’s representation came as a surprise. The 2015 general election resulted in a small drop in women MPs from 39 to 37 percent, and there was a drop from 32 to 30 percent in the 2013 municipal elections, which was maintained in 2017. Consequently, Denmark has fallen from the number 3 position in the 1990s to number 22 in the global ranking of countries in terms of women’s parliamentary representation, having been overtaken by several countries in the Global South that have adopted electoral gender quotas, which is a very unpopular policy instrument in Denmark.¹⁰

At the same time, it has become commonplace in Denmark since the turn of the millennium to have women as party leaders. In 2011, as we have seen, the country got its first woman prime minister. In terms of vertical sex segregation, Danish women MPs attained a share of leadership positions in parliament equal to or slightly below their share as early as

the 1980s, and in 2015 the first female speaker of parliament (the former leader of the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, Pia Kjaersgaard) was elected (Freidenvall et al. 2006; Fiig 2009; Dahlerup 2013; Brunse 2016).

Table 1 showed how 85 percent of the respondents among the Danish MPs supported the position that parliament should mirror or reflect the major groups in the population (also called 'the justice argument'). The literature has identified three additional types of arguments for increasing women's political representation in elected assemblies (Phillips 1995; Wängnerud 2015; Dahlerup 2018), which, taken together, include the prediction that 'women will make a difference'.

The support for the 'difference arguments' is more divided. There is a huge gender gap but also many 'don't knows'. Measured in terms of balance of opinion, there are far more women MPs who support than do not support the three difference arguments: first, that women have different experiences which should be heard; second, that an equal number of female and male MPs will change the political climate; and third, that such a change will change the content of politics, the legislation. Male MPs are greatly divided over the first and the third difference arguments as is revealed by a balance of opinion among male MPs of only 5 and 7 percentage units, respectively. These results indicate that even in a parliament made up of almost 40 percent women, we still find gendered perceptions of the meaning of women's political representation. The expectation is that gender differences will increase when we move to the question of actually being willing to act for women or gender equality.

Substantive Representation of Women

While feminist movements have always wanted female politicians to be their representatives and have criticized elected women for not being feminist enough, the attitude of political parties towards *women's substantive representation* has always been ambivalent. Consequently, female politicians have been torn between conflicting expectations with regard to their political mandate.

Close to Hannah Pitkin's concept of 'substantive representation', meaning 'acting for ... in the interest of', the MPs were asked if they considered it their task to 'promote women's interests/opinions'. We found the usual left-right division. Furthermore, half of the female respondents answered 'Yes' but, surprisingly, so did one-third of the men. This may indicate that this is not (any longer?) seen as question of gender identity. But let's confront this result with the MPs actual engagement. Table 3 reveals a generally high level of actual engagement in policy promotion. The result confirms the conclusion from previous research that women

Table 3. Male and Female MPs' Active Engagement in Gender Equality Issues (%)

	Women	Men	Gender gap (W-M)	Total
Raised gender equality issues in my party group in parliament**	87	57	30	73
Interpellation to a minister	33	25	8	42
Participating in cross-party networks in parliament	48	32	16	41
Contact with women's organizations**	92	48	44	72
Contact with LGBT organizations**	89	53	36	73
Contact with men's/fathers' organizations**	77	43	34	61
Given interviews in media*	83	61	22	73
Written interventions in media**	73	43	30	59

Notes: 2015 MP survey DK, Questions 13 and 6: 'Have you participated in the following activities concerning gender equality policy?' Percentage answering 'Yes' to present or earlier engagement. ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

politicians are much more engaged in gender equality policy making than their male colleagues (Childs 2001; Lovenduski 2005; Wängnerud 2015).

Is there a pattern in the size of the gender gaps? We see particularly huge, significant differences between women and men MPs related to contacts with women's organizations/networks, but most interestingly, it is also primarily the female MPs who are in contact with LGBT organizations and even men's/fathers' organizations. In general, left-wing parties are more engaged in these issues than right-wing parties. However, not surprisingly, those MPs who believe that gender equality has not been achieved are considerably more actively engaged than those belonging to the closed case groups.

While there has been stagnation in policy reforms initiated by the government, we find a relatively high level of engagement on gender equality policy in parliament. There may even be a new and perhaps more polarized debate underway. The prospect of revitalization is supported by the unexpected finding of significant differences according to age as measured by an index of the questions in Table 3, with the younger MPs being the most active.¹¹

Symbolic Representation of Women

Research on the symbolic representation of women deals with multiple aspects (Freidenvall & Sawer 2013). The selected focus is here the perceived importance of having the first woman prime minister, which was of specific interest at the time of the survey. A calculation shows that as of spring 2017, the people of approximately 70 countries in the world have experienced having a woman as their prime minister or president. Table 4

Table 4. Left/Right MPs' View on the Importance of First Woman Prime Minister (%)

	Women	Men	Gender gap (W-M)	Total
Left***	96	81	15	90
Right***	29	0	29	14

Notes: 2015 MP survey DK, Question 15: 'How important is it for a country to get its first woman prime minister?' Percentage answering 'Very important' and 'Important'. Significant difference between left and right parties, *** $p < 0.01$. Differences between men and women within the left/right blocks not statistically significant.

shows a huge left-right gap. Even if Danish feminists and left-leaning politicians were disappointed with the record of Thorning-Schmidt's government, the female MPs from the left parties overwhelmingly support the symbolic importance of having the first female prime minister, and so did most of the leftist men. The most remarkable finding is that none of the right-wing male respondents, who, as we saw, all belong to the closed case segment, found it important for a country to have its first female prime minister. We will now discuss this segment more closely in a broader Danish context.

The Closed Case and the Choice of Policy Instruments

We can now summarize what the position that gender equality is a 'close case' implies. Within an almost hegemonic support for the principle of gender equality in Denmark, which today is even supported by the usually sceptical Danish People's Party ('a Danish value'), one-third of respondents from the Danish parliament perceive gender equality as having almost been obtained or gone 'too far'. This no doubt reflects different ambitions in relation to the goal of 'gender equality' and the legitimate actions. It comes as no surprise that we find profound disagreement around which policy instruments are seen as acceptable. Here, is the DF's point of view:

The Danish People's Party supports full and unreserved gender equality. Gender equality, however, should not be mistaken for positive discrimination [*'positiv særbehandling'*]. (2009 DF Party programme)

Table 5 adds a discussion of day-to-day political issues, yet, it also depicts different attitudes towards the use of radical policy instruments. As expected, the table shows a strong connection between the MPs' general perception of the status of gender equality and their attitudes towards three key contemporary policy proposals. The closed case groups are

Table 5. Policy Instruments. Differences between 'the Closed Case' Groups and the 'Still Inequalities' Groups on Three Contemporary Policy Issues (% of MPs)

Cases	Ban on buying sex***		Earmarking leave for fathers***		Law on gender quotas for company boards***	
	Closed case	Still inequality	Closed case	Still inequality	Closed case	Still inequality
Good proposal	12	57	6	89	6	50
Either/or	12	30	13	5	6	26
Bad proposal	77	14	81	5	88	24

Notes: 215 MP survey DK, Question 18. Good proposal: 'Very good' and 'Quite good'. Bad proposal: 'Very bad' and 'Quite bad'. For the definition of the closed case groups and the still inequality groups, see Figure 1. ***p < 0.01.

massively against these three proposals and the gap with the still-inequality groups is huge, especially with relation to earmarking part of the parental leave for fathers (89 versus 6 percent). Table 5 reveals that Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt clearly did not have the parliamentary groups of her government behind her when she dropped earmarking part of the parental leave for fathers, which was originally included in the government's platform. However, on the two other issues, a considerable minority of the still-inequality MPs expresses either doubt or even opposition, while the closed case groups are more firm in their opposition.

This study has demonstrated systematic differences in the perceptions of what gender equality implies in terms of goals, policy instruments and diagnoses of inequality between the closed case and the still-inequality groups. The closed case groups lean to the right on other issues such as income inequality, privatization and environmental protection. After all, the closed case groups are, as mentioned earlier, predominantly from the right-wing parties. Negative attitudes towards state intervention seem to play a role, as the party programmes of the right-wing parties show.

Limits to State Intervention

Historically, right-wing opposition to gender equality policies was justified less in terms of gender equality having almost been achieved than as a limit to state intervention in the relations between the sexes (Dahlerup 1990; Borchorst 2007; Olsen 2014). With the neo-liberal tendencies in Danish politics, this argument has gained new value. The young neoliberal party, Liberal Alliance, claims: 'We will vote against all proposals, which focus on equality of result. ... All state regulations of gender relations (*'al kønsregulering'*) should be abolished' (2017 Liberal Alliance party

programme). This may be seen as a masculinist reaction from the party with the highest share of male voters. Yet, when the party, now in government, removed public support for the library of KVINFO, the renowned Danish information centre for gender research, the spokeswoman of the party called the centre ‘state-funded propaganda’.¹² The move resulted in protests from the international research community, but in vain.

The present prime minister’s party, the almost 150 year-old Liberals, similarly rejects legislation to promote equality. Instead, it advocates ‘a gender equality, which should be evaluated by its degree of voluntariness, not equality of result’ (Venstre 2017). It goes without saying that all four right-wing parties reject the proposals listed in Table 5 and in general denounce any quota regulations.¹³ With the strong tradition in Danish politics for seeking consensus among the major parties on legislation related to gender equality, these sharpened right-wing positions have no doubt contributed to the present pause and stagnation in reform. In sum, the closed case discourse contains the following elements:

- Satisfaction with the present level of gender (in)equality, what Ulrik Kjær (1999) has labelled ‘saturation without parity’
- Remaining gender inequalities are mostly the result of women’s own choices
- Limit to state interventions on gender equality issues
- Rejection of radical measures like quotas
- Gender equality is a Danish value; it is not shared by immigrants

However, several elements such as equality as a Danish value and the rejection of state intervention in this policy area have spread to the leadership of the Social Democratic Party. Public campaigns are recommended instead of legislation, for instance, in order to encourage more fathers to take parental leave. There is clearly a fear of losing even more blue-collar votes to the DF or other right-wing parties.

Conclusion

Based on the first Danish parliamentary survey focusing on MPs’ perceptions of gender equality principles and politics, this article has identified conflicting parliamentary discourses according to gender and left-right divisions. The vagueness of the concept has no doubt been a prerequisite for the ‘we are all for gender equality’ discourse. Today, even the anti-immigration Danish People’s Party supports the principle of gender equality under their new understanding it as a ‘Danish value’.

This study adds to the literature through its comprehensive scope, which makes it possible to demonstrate how the general support for the principle of gender equality among Danish parliamentarians is not just a matter of lip service since the traditionalist views on women have little support. However, by posing some fundamental questions beyond disagreements over the day-to-day policies, the study has been able to demonstrate substantial disagreements over gender equality issues according to gender and party, and confirm the prevalence of continuous parliamentary gender and party gaps.

The conclusion from this study is that the *size* of the gender gaps – a relatively new perspective in gender gap analyses – varies remarkably. The pattern is more complex than was expected. *Huge gender gaps* (> 30 percent) were found on questions concerning the MPs' active engagement in gender equality politics; female MPs are much more active than their male colleagues. *Considerable* gender gaps (15–30 percent) were found concerning the diagnosing of gender inequality. For example, female MPs were much more inclined than their male colleagues to see women's under-representation as being caused by discrimination and structural barriers.

Within the limits of a parliamentary survey at a single point in time, it is possible to conclude that divisions over the diagnosis of still existing gender inequalities and over goals and strategies in this field have not disappeared in the Danish parliament, as some might have expected, with the increase in women's parliamentary representation. Additionally, the few questions that are available in a time-series (parliamentary surveys of 1994 and 2008) show similar gender gaps.

This study has identified a new discourse according to which gender equality is a 'closed case' – that is, it has by and large been achieved or has 'gone too far'. This 'modern' discourse is supported by one-third of the respondents in the survey, including all of the male MPs from the four right-wing parties. Within the framework of a general conservative and neoliberal trend in Danish politics, this discourse, which is well known from the public debate, seems to have contributed to the recent stagnation in gender equality reforms, including under the 2011–15 Social Democratic government led by Denmark's first woman prime minister. The consequence is that Denmark, in contrast to the other Nordic countries, has moved down on the Global Gender Gap Index.

The new focus on male voters and male politicians has underlined the contextual nature of gender gaps. Based on the results of this survey, one can only support the request from Kokkonen and Wängnerud (2017, 213) for more studies of a possible masculine reaction, a 'reversed' tipping point in response to the growing number of visible women leaders. However, at the same time, in Denmark as well as globally, many new feminist

groups and manifestations have appeared as a response, as in the case of Donald Trump. Consequently, the future might bring not diminishing conflicts, but rather increased *polarization* over gender equality policies (see also Campbell et al. 2010). In the Danish context, this might revitalize a stagnated debate in a parliament, where, after all, the majority of the MPs still believe that equality between women and men has not yet been realized and is worth striving for.

NOTES

1. This overview is based on Borchorst and Dahlerup (2003), Dahlerup (2013) and new data from the ongoing research project 'The Political Gender Equality Regime in Denmark (GRIP)'. The 2015 MP survey DK was conducted by the author of this article as part of the GRIP project, which was financed by the VELUX Foundations. The author would like to thank Iben Nørup, who worked as assistant on the survey, as well as Ditte Shamshiri-Petersen, who provided last-minute help.
2. Earmarking implies that a certain part of the parental leave is reserved for the father and is nullified if the father does not use it.
3. <https://www.danmarkskanon.dk/om-danmarkskanonen/english/>
4. The second concept equals what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call a 'hegemonic' discourse, while Critical Frame Analysis as in Lombardo et al. (2009) comes closer to the first meaning of discourse analysis.
5. Campbell et al. (2010, 181, Table 1) use the formulation 'Gone too far'. Their alternatives were: 'Gone much too far', 'Gone a little too far', 'Is about right', 'Not gone quite far enough'.
6. In addition to the lack of longitudinal data, the high turnover of the Danish parliament prevents cohort analyses of the present parliament, since it predominantly consists of MPs elected in 2015 or 2011.
7. In linguistic terms, the two middle positions may seem rather close. However, when compared against other questions in the survey, they turn out to be clearly distinct, as they do in the public debate.
8. The discourse that gender equality has gone too far may imply a demand for reforms, but now in favour of men as opposed to what is seen as the women-centred gender equality policies of the past. However, the men's groups, who support this position, have presented few proposals of their own except on the issue of divorce legislation.
9. In an earlier population survey, considerable gender gaps were found (12–23) on questions of whether gender equality had been achieved within some specific areas: education, parental leave and salaries (Christensen & Siim 2001, Table 6.8).
10. <http://www.ipu.org>; <http://www.quotaproject.org>; Dahlerup (2013).
11. Standardized regression coefficient, ordinary least squares, of -0.33 , significant at 0.05 level, negative score equals lower age. Age is used here, since the Danish data, in contrast to Öberg and Wängnerud (2013) on Sweden and Childs (2001) on Britain, do not allow for cohort analyses by using year of entrance or number of terms in parliament (see Note 5 above).
12. *Berlingske*, 22 March 2017.
13. Yet, all parties, including the right-wing ones, support actions against violence against women.

APPENDIX

The political parties in the Danish Parliament at the time of the survey (late 2014–spring 2015) are listed below from left to right. Following the last two decades of governmental coalition patterns, the first four parties on

the list are here called ‘left-wing’ parties’ and the last four are ‘right-wing’ parties. The 2011–15 government at the time of the survey, led by the first woman prime minister, was formed by parties numbered 2, 3 and 4 on the list, but the Socialist People’s Party left the government mid-term. Results of the 2011 general election are shown as percentages.

- Red Green Alliance – *Enhedslisten*: 6.7%
- Socialist People’s Party – *Socialistisk Folkeparti*: 9.2%
- Social Democrats – *Socialdemokraterne*: 24.8%
- Social Liberals – *Det radikale Venstre*: 9.5%
- Liberal Alliance (neoliberals): 5.0%
- Conservatives – *Det Konservative Folkeparti*: 4.9%
- Liberals – *Venstre, Danmarks liberale parti*: 26.7%
- Danish People’s Party – *Dansk Folkeparti*: 12.3%

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