DEMOCRATISATION OF DENMARK: THE INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP

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Historical Context

In Denmark, women gained suffrage relatively early and undramatically in 1915, when a constitutional reform granted suffrage rights to all men and women over the age of 29. The first democratic Danish constitution of 1849 had granted the vote to men above the age of 30 who had their own household, had lived in the constituency for at least one year, had paid back or been released of their debt, and could dispose of their own estate. ‘Women, poor people, criminals and fools’ were excluded. As a result, only 14–15 percent of the population could vote.1

The struggle for women’s vote lasted 66 years and was part of the broader struggle for women’s formal equal rights. Granting women the vote was controversial and affected fundamental power structures and male privileges in marriage, in the labor market, and in politics. Indeed, the history of female suffrage illuminates the close intersection between women’s civil and political rights—between the private and public arenas. It was not an isolated ‘women’s struggle’, but an intrinsic aspect of the deep transformation and democratization of society that took place over a period spanning the end of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century.

The key playing field was parliament, where male parliamentarians debated women’s political citizenship.2 Indeed, in this chapter we attempt to move beyond the emphasis that Danish gender research places on women’s organizations as the main advocates of female suffrage,3 and

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instead stress the key role that male parliamentarians played in the struggle for universal suffrage that included women's vote. Women were active in voluntary organizations, and some participated in the suffragette organizations⁴ and in local networks,⁵ but the suffragette movement was never a mass movement and was never as militant as it was in Great Britain.⁶

Our main argument is that the Danish struggle for women's suffrage was part of the political and constitutional conflict between the political left and right over parliamentary democracy.⁷ This was a sharp class conflict between the urban and rural political forces, between landowners on the one side and small farmers and workers on the other. The landowners in the Conservative Party (Højre), which dominated the upper chamber (Landstinget) during the period of enfranchisement, perceived—rightly—a reform of the election system that would expand suffrage to cover women, workers, and servants as a serious threat to their own political power platforms.⁸ The Conservative Party defended the privileged vote and argued against women's vote. The left—a combination of wealthy farmers in the Agrarian Liberal Party (Venstre), workers in the Social Democratic Party, and from 1905 also small-scale farmers, school teachers, and intellectuals in the newly formed Radical Liberal Party (Det Radikale Venstre)—dominated in the lower chamber (Rigsdagen) and struggled for parliamentarism and universal suffrage and defended, for the most part, women's vote.⁹

The History of Female Suffrage

The general political scene for the universal enfranchisement of women and men was based on the four-party system of the time, with the Social

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⁶ Dahlerup, “Women's Entry into Politics”.
⁷ We want to thank Jytte Larsen, KVINFO, whose article from 2008 served as one of the inspirations for this article. The following section is based on historical analyses in Christiansen N.F., Klassefamfundet organiseres. 1900–1925. Danmarkshistorie, Bind 12, 1900–1925 (København: 1990); and Ravn A.B., “Kvindefellesskaber under kapitalismen”, in Ravn A.B. and Rostgård M. (eds.), Kvindefellesskaber, Hefter for historie (Aalborg: 1985).
⁸ Christiansen, Klassesamfundet organiseres 59.
⁹ Ibid., 53.