

## #OneOfUs – MeToo and the myth of gender-equal Denmark

Mar 7th, 2024 / Henriette Laursen



*Several organizations demonstrate in Copenhagen on Friday, 8 March 2019.*

FOTO: IMAGO / RITZAU SCANPIX

The MeToo movement got off to a slow start in Denmark, with the initial conversation focusing as much on the movement's legitimacy as on understanding and tackling the problem. Only when the public's TV darling Sofie Linde shared her own experiences, and a substantial number of media professionals and young politicians teamed up, did the movement gain strength.

A handful of prominent cases has since led to contract terminations for male individuals and to in-depth scrutiny internally in numerous companies and work branches, to amendments of labour market regulations, and to a profound and ongoing re-evaluation of what can be termed the social contract in the workplace. Nonetheless, a general perception of Denmark as already being gender equal may have contributed to a delay both in accepting the MeToo movement and in addressing its demands.

### Nothing but “attention-seeking women”

Had we known what lay ahead, our perspective on two events in early 2017 – six months before MeToo emerged as a hashtag and a movement of significant impact – might have been different in the broader public discourse.

At the beginning of the year, [Susan Simonsen released the book \*Det underdanige og det magtrulde\*](#) (The Submissive and the Powerful), in which she recounts her experiences at Denmark's parliamentary building, Christiansborg, where she had interned with the centre-right party Venstre. Simonsen details instances of leering glances and groping while working in parliament.

A few months later, [Sonja Maria Jensen shared her experiences at the city council of Nyborg](#). As a member of the Social Democrats, she disclosed facing not only sexual advances but also derogatory comments aimed at belittling her based on her gender and age. The reaction in political and media circles was largely dismissive, labelling the young women as attention-seekers who needed to toughen up. They were encouraged to leave politics if they couldn't handle the heat.

Fast forward to October 15, 2017, when American actor Alyssa Milano revived the MeToo-hashtag initially coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006. Milano's #MeToo opened the global public arena to a flood of testimonies on sexism, sexual harassment, and abuse in the entertainment industry and various other sectors, and kickstarted a supranational movement.

Except, it didn't quite catch on in Denmark.

### Tabloid gossip and celebrity scandal

While MeToo triggered a tidal wave elsewhere, it was merely a ripple in Denmark. Subsequent studies have revealed that the issue was only partially taken seriously, with the topic relegated to tabloid gossip and celebrity scandal. [A comparative analysis of MeToo media coverage in Denmark and in neighbouring Sweden revealed significant differences](#). The Swedish press predominantly addressed the issue from broader political and societal perspectives, and did so in the front sections of newspapers and equivalent electronic formats.

Danish media, however, continued in the same vein as it had taken in early 2017, casting doubt on the truth and severity of the emerging testimonies. Of the nine news outlets examined, seven had twice as many critical articles about MeToo as supportive ones, and the coverage was largely consigned to the cultural and opinion sections.

Three recurring narratives also emerged: MeToo was portrayed as a witch-hunt against defenceless men and sympathy was expressed towards those called out as perpetrators; women were advised to 'toughen up' and be more resilient; and women were told that they themselves were to blame for the harassment.

However, one specific case did make headlines – that of film producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen, a prominent figure of Danish cinema. Allegations surfaced about his penchant for bathing nude with employees and interns at the Zentropa film company. One reported

episode involved Jensen reportedly holding a microphone under a female employee's skirt, quipping, 'Listen, the pussy can talk.' The Swedish film company Film i Väst demanded Jensen's name be removed from its project collaborations, and Jensen was temporarily suspended for two weeks.

## Specificity in survey questions matters

By this point, consecutive labour ministers repeatedly referred to studies from the National Research Centre for the Working Environment that concluded that there was no environment of sexism or sexual harassment in Denmark's workplaces. The basis for this was only 3.6 percent of respondents admitting to experiencing harassment. However, later investigations revealed that the low affirmative percentage could be linked to the wording of the questions.

When asked, 'Have you been subjected to sexual harassment in the past 12 months?', just 3.6 percent responded affirmatively. However, the **affirmative rate skyrocketed to 20 percent** when survey questions were formulated more specifically and concretely.

Examples of these more specific questions included: 'Have you experienced unwanted sexual approaches in the form of physical touching, for example hugs, or kisses?'; 'Have you experienced your body, sexuality or appearance being commented on in a way you found offensive or uncomfortable?'; or 'Has anyone sent or shown you images or film clips with sexual content that you found offensive or unpleasant, for example pornographic or sexist material?'

In short: we missed it.

## "I will destroy you"

Then, one evening in late summer 2020, TV host and media darling **Sofie Linde took the stage at an award ceremony and said two things**: that her pay was lower than that of her male colleagues and, startlingly, that during her early television career, a well-known media figure told her at a party, 'If you don't come out and suck my dick, I'll ruin your career. I'll destroy you.'

Linde's revelation garnered intense attention in the first two weeks that followed, but this attention was primarily negative. Was an award show the appropriate venue to discuss sexism? Was she implicating all men by not naming the person? Why hadn't she shared it earlier? During an episode of the weekly media programme *Presselogen* (*The Press Lodge*) on the national channel TV2, four editors-in-chief dismissed it as nonsense, claiming that the media industry had already dealt with the issue in 2017, and there was nothing more to address.

However, on 10 September, the national newspaper Politiken published a front page spread with the names of **701 women from the media industry supporting Sofie Linde**. The list quickly expanded to include 1,615 women.

## Sexism and hypocrisy in elected offices

Shortly after, **322 women in politics rallied behind the hashtag #EnBlandtOs (#OneOfUs)**, sharing not only names and statements of support but also testimonies of sexist and offensive experiences. These women spanned diverse political affiliations.

This marked a turning point in Denmark and sexism and sexual harassment began to lead to consequences. A number of prominent figures in politics and the media resigned or lost their jobs, including the Lord Mayor of Copenhagen, the leader of the social liberal party Radikale, an editor-in-chief, and probably the most renowned TV host in the country.

MeToo entering the political sphere seems to have made a profound difference. The #OneOfUs testimonies shifted the attention from media and entertainment industry to a completely different field of work, and one that is – ideally – held to the highest standards in any democracy: elected office.

Hypocrisy, too, may have played a central role in MeToo gaining strength. For example, the leader of Radikale himself spoke passionately against sexism in the very days when rumours about a MeToo case in the party began to build, a case that ultimately saw him leave office.

Other sectors followed suit, with claims of sexual harassment in academia and other societal sectors. In October, eleven women from a variety of trade unions featured on the front cover of Politiken, speaking out against sexist culture and sexual abuse within the trade union movement. It was revealed that minors in the girls' choir at the national public service broadcaster, DR, had been subject to harassment and groping from the previous director. The music industry joined in, raising issues not only of sexualisation and sexism but also of unequal pay and the enduring overrepresentation of male artists.

## MeToo induced changes

The problem gradually came to be recognised as a worrying, widespread, phenomenon and the Prime Minister was compelled to

address it. Numerous industries have had no choice but to actively respond to concerns around MeToo and to begin tackling the issue of sexual harassment and sexism. Surveys have been conducted, whistle-blower mechanisms implemented, leaders trained, and policies formulated.

Economic compensation rules have been revised twice in recent years, allowing for greater compensation for workplace harassment. The social partners involved in negotiating Denmark's important collective agreements have reached an accord to provide better protections for young workers.

The national perspective on MeToo has also shifted, moving beyond individual cases and "scandalous" revelations concerning public figures, to consider more systemic challenges and the need for cultural change.

A number of projects have been initiated to foster awareness – not just on issues specific to MeToo, but also on general gender-based discrimination, hopefully paving the way for broader cultural change. This includes changes at a political level – in December 2022, the Danish Parliament voted unanimously to amend the rape provision in Denmark's penal code, so that sex with a person who has not explicitly given consent is now considered rape.

## Re-evaluation of workplace social contracts

These responses pose an interesting question: could such change have occurred without MeToo? MeToo has contributed to a re-evaluation of what can be termed the social contract in the workplace. Previously, sexism and sexual harassment were handled on a case-by-case basis, with warnings about specific individuals and high-risk situations like parties. Now, the expectation is that workplaces actively engage in preventing sexism and harassment.

We can also see the emergence of a new norm among political leaders. The recent years of surveying, dialoguing, research and testimonies have created a new understanding, that 'no known cases' is not a sign of absence, but rather a sign of not having looked hard enough.

It has also become clear that companies cannot afford to do nothing when a case comes to light. This was evident when 2021 employees pointed out problematic behaviour by the director of the pig-breeding company DanBred. Initially, the board protected the director, but the issue gained public and mediatic saliency, and eventually led to the resignation of not only the Director, but of the entire board.

## Stronger focus on everyday sexism

In the early years of MeToo, attention was focused primarily on more severe and directly criminal offenses. This is understandable, given that the movement began with accusations against an American film producer for serial rape. This has changed too, with increased awareness of problematic behaviour in everyday situations. When the leader of the party Radikale resigned – after revelations he had placed his hand on a female colleague's thigh – debates focussed heavily on whether a hand on a thigh could disqualify him from the political arena.

Today, there is a sharper focus on the harm of everyday sexism and its incremental effect, where many smaller and seemingly less severe incidents, over time, normalise unacceptable behaviour and, ultimately, cause severe harm to the person experiencing them. This is often described as **a "drip drip" effect**. As a result, no one now questions the validity of the experiences described by former Enhedslisten politician Pernille Skipper in her recent book, *Rend mig* (an expletive in Danish), despite her account focusing on everyday sexism rather than harassment or assault.

Over the summer of 2023, MeToo took on a new dimension when it was revealed that several young men had experienced violations, with instances of groping from their boss, the female leader of the Danish Trade Union Confederation. This sparked a conversation about whether it might be considered a stronger taboo for men to speak up and share their experiences. Questions arose about whether the shock might be greater for men because, unlike women, they are unaware that such incidents can happen to them. Alternatively, could the damage be less for men since they are generally spared the burden of blame so often placed on women who speak up?

## Challenges remain

Those of us working on these issues every day can celebrate the numerous changes and advancements, but we remain vigilant to signs of backlash and to those areas where progress is not evident. Sexism still exists in the Danish workplace, of course, and concerns persist in sectors traditionally dominated by one gender. Currently, there is apprehension about the work environment in the Danish defence forces, for example, where surveys have suggested widespread problems. Similarly, it is clear that unskilled industries have not experienced the same transformation as "trendy" sectors like media and entertainment.

There are also indications that MeToo is a generational struggle. When the 322 women in politics issued the collective #OneOfUs call

for change, it was quite noticeably a younger generation challenging outdated standards. These women were positively received as they represented various political spectrums and were seen as the future. However, their age also prompted comments from older women with more extensive political experience, who suggested they had themselves endured far worse, and that these young women should simply get on with the job.

The recently deceased and highly-renowned Social Democratic politician, the former EU Commissioner, Minister, and Mayor of Copenhagen, Ritt Bjerregaard, addressed both her own experiences and the call to action from young politicians, revealing that she too had encountered 'a bit of everything' – usually a euphemism for something uncomfortable and unwanted. Back then, she said, she could not speak up because all her efforts were to fight for a seat at the table.

Bjerregaard viewed the current situation as fundamentally different, describing it as no longer a question for women about merely securing a seat at the table, but rather of participating in the conversation about *how* women want to be at the table. She argued that now is the time for taking part in setting the table, so to speak – and to expect and demand equal, fair and dignified work environments.

## The Gender Justice Lie

Much thinking has of course gone into why MeToo took such a slow and fickle-minded start in Denmark. One explanation may be the so-called "gender justice lie" (in Danish, *ligestillingsløgnen*), the general sentiment that gender equality was achieved in Denmark a long time ago and that it is therefore a waste of time to talk about or engage with the issue, despite the persistence of injustices and imbalances. Indeed, this sentiment is still regularly used by many societal leaders to dismiss any concern – even evidence-based – about sexism and gender equality in society at large.

Raising the issue of equal pay, for example – as media celebrity Sofie Linde did in 2022 – is often met with a blanket rejection and the argument that we already have equal pay in Denmark because we have an Equal Pay Act. Statistics from 2021 exposed the lie. **Men in Denmark earn 12.3 percent more than women during the span of their lives.** A recent study from Copenhagen Business School, CBS, points to a **gender-based pay discrepancy of 7 percent for work carried out at the same workplace.** And according to VIVE – The National Research and Knowledge Centre for Welfare, the so-called **"unexplained difference" between men's and women's pay is 2 percent.**

## The Nordic Paradox

Another, related, explanation may be rooted in the so-called "Nordic Paradox". The Nordic countries, including Denmark, enjoy comparatively high gender equality by legislation and regulation, and participation in the workforce is both high and close to gender balanced: **In 2022, Denmark's workforce counted 1.6 million men and 1.5 million women.**

Digging deeper, however, reveals a more nuanced picture. While more men in Denmark work in the private sector, more women work in the public sector where the pay gap tends to be smaller. However, more men work in construction, transport, and agriculture, while care professions and education are still dominated by women – sectors that are subject to gendered stereotypes and lower average pay.

## Changing perceptions of equality

These facts might not directly explain the reluctance of one part of society to accept sexism and MeToo-related issues as problems, but they may help us to understand that reluctance. An atmosphere of 'we are gender equal' and 'we reached gender equality a long time back,' allowed the strident calls for profound change to be dismissed as an overreaction.

However, the unrelenting facts and the myriad of testimonies from a wide cross-section of society have painted a new picture of the situation in Danish workplaces and society as a whole. To many, this may be a surprising, and definitely a discomforting, one, but it is also a convincing portrait, that has made the need for change both evident, and urgent.

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