

# FROM FEMINISM TO FAVOURITISM? GENDER REPRESENTATION IN UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

HANS BONDE, PROFESSOR, INSTITUTE OF SPORTS SCIENCE AND NUTRITION, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES,  
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN. HBONDE@NEXS.KU.DK

Favouritism of women attempt to create 'gender balance' in sectors like politics, life, culture, universities and professional athletes. Thereby discriminating against all other groups, and makes the 'winning' women a disservice, because they have not fought for their positions, but they were granted.

## INTRODUCTION

Many non-Scandinavian readers from countries where women are actively subjected to discrimination in many fields of society will surely be concerned about the direction this article seems to be taking. Within the research systems of the Scandinavian countries, can it really be true that favouritism towards women researchers is taking place which at the same time discriminates against male applicants? It is precisely this claim that the current article believes it can substantiate.

It seems something of a paradox that women in Scandinavia today have, on average, a higher educational level than men yet it continues to be men who primarily appear as top researchers. In Denmark, for example, only 16 per cent

of all professors are women. This can create difficulties for research that is unable to draw on the whole body of talent in its full dimension, and it can create problems for women researchers if their low share in top research is a result of discrimination.

It would be of huge benefit to society if the enormous sums invested in raising educational standards for women provided greater outputs in terms of research. Currently in Scandinavian countries programmes in mentoring, research leadership and networking are offered specifically for women. Over the last twenty years increasingly radical support mechanisms have been introduced to ensure that women are exempt from male competition. The aim of the following analysis is to briefly analyse and discuss these initiatives in Denmark.

## COPENHAGEN WOMEN'S PROGRAMME

In Denmark we can observe a strong tendency over the past dozen years for special top-research programmes solely for women with the intention of increasing the share of female lecturers, professors and research-group leaders. Consequently, leading trends within modern feminism have moved away from the original demand of enlightened feminism that "no one should suffer discrimination" to discrimination becoming a necessary tool to achieve a statistical gender balance.

In 2008, Copenhagen University introduced a strategy to increase its numbers of women professors aimed at an ideal minimum of 40% appointees from the 'under-represented' sex. The idea behind this new gender policy was that generally financial rewards amounting

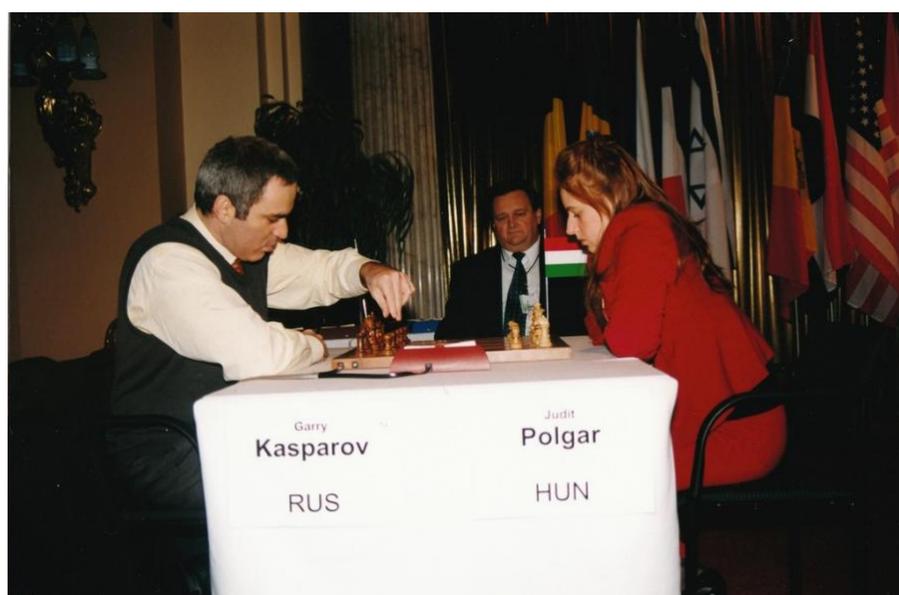


Figure 1. As the world's best female chess player, Judit Polgár expressed it: "I may well participate in the special championships for women, but if I wish to develop my full potential, I should play in the men's division".

Photo: <http://juditpolgar.com>

to many million kroner should go to faculties and institutes that appointed women professors.

At the institute level, any upgrading of women associate professors to full professorships could in the light of this programme be seen as cost-neutral in terms of salary for the first five years of their appointment. In the case of five-year professorships, therefore, there was no cost in upgrading a woman. Faculties could simply send out a list giving notice that institutes would be rewarded with million-kroner sums should they employ a woman professor.

Just before the reward scheme for women came to an end in 2013, the process of appointing women speeded up throughout many areas of the University of Copenhagen, to the extent that in the first half of 2013 a total of 52 professors were appointed, of whom exactly half were women.

When a position is publicly announced, male applicants can feel discriminated against even though an apparently open recruitment procedure is taking place. One male applicant, an associate professor applying for a professorship in 2011, was told, much to his surprise, that the leadership wished to appoint a woman. The associate professor described the process as follows:

I am an associate professor at a department of Copenhagen University. The institute announced a professorship in exactly my field. I am the leading research scholar in the group, with unarguably the best publications, students, collaborative agreements and international awards. I contacted upper management because I didn't really understand why I had never heard about the position before and was categorically told that the position was earmarked for a woman so that the institute could obtain a bonus professorship from the deanship. Of course I applied for the position and for my qualifications to be evaluated. The interview was somewhat embarrassing, as the other applicant (a woman) was not especially qualified or highly profiled within the institute (but had been evaluated externally).

## OTHER WOMEN'S PROGRAMMES

Following the University of Copenhagen's success in increasing its share of women professors using its system of financial rewards, Aarhus University felt similarly encouraged, and would turn to

an even more radical practice. Coming into effect on 1 February 2011, following a special exemption from the Ministry of Science, Aarhus University decided to establish ten lectureships and ten five-year focused professorships (MSOs – professorships with special responsibilities) for women, which included financial support for these positions. The idea was to award financial bonuses to those faculties or schools where women postdoctoral scholars were appointed to positions at the level of lecturer and above.

During negotiations for the Danish national budget in 2013, yet another initiative was approved for the promotion of women research and teaching personnel, the YDUN programme [Younger women Devoted to a UNiversity career] that has earmarked 110 million Danish kroner for potential women research-group leaders, financed by The Danish Council for Independent Research (DFF) and by a special government grant. The acronym YDUN plays on images of strong women from Nordic mythology in the form of the goddess YDUN, who gave golden apples to the Gods to ensure eternal youth.

The YDUN programme, however, has come under increasingly severe pressure. In April this year the Minister for Higher Education and Science and the Minister for Equal Status were summoned to a joint meeting by the research spokesmen of the Danish political parties Venstre, Conservative and the Danish People's Party, supported by the Liberal Alliance. These two ministers responsible were subjected to heavy criticism, with Venstre's spokesman for research policy declaring that future governments of the centre and centre-right would no longer accept exemptions from gender discrimination for reasons that included the labelling of women candidates as a B-team. For the first time, nearly half the Danish Parliament had explicitly turned against favouritism for women in Danish research. (See video of the joint meeting at <http://www.ft.dk/webtv/video/20131/fiv/td.1106285.aspx?as=1>).

A paternalistic structure can be noted within the YDUN programme. The DFF comprises five men and one woman, each of whom is head of his/her respective subject section – no suggestion here of gender balance or, to use the council's own key term, 'diversity'.

To a great extent, the argumentation behind these programmes for women



Figure 2. Because you deserve it. "If we get a society of favoritism, women end up in a B-team. Already, many are looking at their female professor colleagues and asking: Is she an A or B professor? Has she entered through the front door or the back door with a million rewards to the institution that hires her? The very idea is demeaning to women. A woman is not respected as an individual, but considered as an element, a fabric, where you say: We need more of woman". Hans Bonde in Politiken 13.4.2013.

is statistical, and at the core of YDUN's case are the so-called 'She Figures'. In the words of the DFF leadership: The figures show clearly that men are appointed to higher research positions at university far more than women. It applies to the whole of Europe but especially to Denmark, where, for example, women hold just sixteen percent of all professorships (Christiansen et al., 2013).

A further investigation then shows that Denmark is surpassed in the proportion of female academic staff (at what the European Commission designates grade A) by countries such as Latvia (32%) and Rumania (36%); countries that Denmark does not usually care to regard as positive role models, whether that be socially, economically or in terms of research – since according to the EU Gender Equality Index, Romania is found at the absolute bottom position (35.3); compared with Denmark at the

other end of the scale with 73.6, taking second place and superseded only by Sweden. A high percentage of women professors in countries such as Romania, therefore, surely cannot be directly coupled with the idea that "helping women benefits research" as the leadership of DFF suggests. That Norway is relatively well placed in its proportion of academic staff at grade A is a result of Norway having introduced a far less restrictive system for professorships in contrast to Denmark whereby highly productive lecturers can simply apply to be upgraded to the level of a full professor.

## DISCUSSION

All in all we can observe a strong tendency in Denmark over the past dozen years for special top-research programmes solely for women with the intention of increasing the share of female lecturers, professors and research-group leaders. Consequently, leading trends within modern feminism have moved away from the original demand of enlightened feminism

that "no one should suffer discrimination" to discrimination becoming a necessary tool to achieve a statistical gender balance.

This begs the question of whether Scandinavian societies are not developing a new tendency towards the establishment of parallel cultures, where women are once again classified as 'the other', as a special case that requires social support.

In terms of the legitimacy of these programmes, it can be noted firstly, that the programmes were imposed from above and furthermore with a minimum of discussion between the various views on their validity; and, secondly, that the public in general, which includes other research scholars and students, rejects them. Even at the higher levels of leadership a resistance can be detected, as is clear through the example of Aarhus University. This is probably the main reason why Copenhagen and Aarhus universities have made no effort to have the special women's programmes renewed in 2014.

If gender representation is allowed to spread to the special representation

of other interest groups, do we not risk splintering the enlightenment ideal that individuals are first and foremost citizens, and only afterwards have numerous kinds of special identities? Society risks becoming fragmented by special interests in which a group's particular characteristics are taken as the essential difference that the state must recognise through separate legislation.

For further investigation, I will pose the question: Are we not on the road to breaking with society's fundamental principles of trust (Adam S. Seligman), justice (John Rawls) and meritocracy (John Stuart Mills) if we start to distribute research resources and appointments on the basis of gender?

For an analysis of female favouritism in the light of the philosopher Seligman, the political scientist Rawls and the analyst of democracy Stuart Mills, see my forthcoming research article "From Feminism to Favouritism? – Gender representation in university research", in the journal: *Økonomi & Politik*, 2014, vol. 3, pp. 3-23.