

Female representation in unions in Denmark

Merete Pedersen, member of the Union of commercial and Clerical Employees in Denmark (HK) and of The Red-Green Alliance, Nov. 2000.

Facts

Approx. 90% of the women in Denmark are a part of the labour force. Most unions are dominated by one sex – only 3 of the 23 unions in the Danish national union have equal numbers of both sexes and one union have only female members. In male dominated unions women do almost not exist as elected shop stewards or other deputies, and men are over represented in female dominated unions. If women are active in committees in the union it is mostly on the topics: Education, environmental issues and equal rights committees.

What is happening in the discussion about women rights at the moment?

The discussion of women's rights and equal rights has not been a central issue for a long period. In the last couple of years the discussion has been raised again mainly by academics in a broader view than just "more female leaders!" But it is still very much concentrated on demands on an individual level and not demands to the working conditions.

In our union there has been a quiet development to the better, and the work for equal rights has been more organised – but with not much result yet.

Development in society

But quietly things are happening: Last year we got a minister for equal rights in the Danish government – the female minister of habitation. And there are regulations for the state committees regarding women's representation. There is a professorship on research of the sexes. And a "knowledge centre" with representation from unions, employers and researchers.

Now 70% of the work force in Denmark is in the service trades. There is a decline in trades dominated by men i.e. agricultural and increase in trades with mixed sexes: Service and female trades: health care and social work.

Flexible "rotating workplaces also break down the barriers between male and female work. Surveys show that people prefer to have colleagues of both sexes. It is time that we use this opportunity in the change of the work trades to make better workplaces with room for both men and women.

Women in men's trades

In the mid-80'ties the strategy was to educate women in typical male trades. But the strategy failed because the employers didn't want to hire women in men's jobs. I myself am an example of this. Only in the painters' union there is still women: One third of the members are women. Some women took further education in their trade, but most women got unemployed and had to change trade to more traditional work for women.

Demands

But it is important to assure mixed representation in the new trades, especially information technology. But also in the electrician branch there is good possibilities because the demands

to service is changing. Small-scale experiments show good results. But the unions in traditional male organisations have to put up demands that give more reasonable connection between work and home. At the moment men with small children work most of all: Even though we have 37 hours work per week, these men work 45 hours in average.

Ways to improve women's influence in the unions

- 👍 Payment for participating in union activities
- 👍 Priorance of topics of women's interests such as workplace safety and health, education etc.
- 👍 More influence in the committees
- 👍 Possibility for child care under meetings
- 👍 Change in work forms in the unions with open committees and more democracy.

With more and more regulation transferred from legislation to agreements on the labour market for instance pensions, the importance of breaking down barriers between the male and the female labour market and put equalisation in centre increases!

Merete Pedersen, the Red-Green Alliance, Nov. 26. 2000