

# Women's Entry into Politics: The Experience of the Danish Local and General Elections 1908–20

Drude Dahlerup, University of Aarhus

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## 1. Introduction

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The entry of women into politics may be studied in quantitative terms of how many were nominated and elected. When women have been included in studies of recruitment to public office – which has not been often (Means 1972) – the question has usually been how far women are from gaining representation in proportion to their numbers in the population. When studying the first elections after female enfranchisement, we find, however, that other questions were raised by the politically active women of those days. Should women as voters and candidates in elections simply

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adjust to the cleavages of the established political party system, or should they try to introduce new goals and perhaps new dimensions of conflicts into the political system? Could such goals be furthered through the established political parties or did they demand the formation of new channels of representation for women? Thus, to the study of participation in quantitative terms, we must add the study of participation in terms of representation of interests.

Did all women feel that they had common interests, or did women in fact enter political life just like any newly enfranchised age group? Women had been excluded from the vote because of their gender, and with few exceptions they received the right to vote as a group. They were generally the last group of subjects to be granted the right of participation in political life. Ideologically, women had been treated as a special kind, as the second sex. Did this position of women in society constitute a basis for joint action, since in reality their lives were very different, as they belonged to sharply divided classes?

This article will discuss two sets of questions. First, how did enfranchised women react to the established political system? The analysis will be centred around the aims and strategies of the women's rights movement in Denmark in these first elections. Other politically active women will be mentioned, but more briefly. The reactions of women voters in general will also be studied. In Denmark, as in many other European countries, some women advocated the foundation of a Women's Party after enfranchisement. We shall study the ideas behind these proposals, the attempts to realize the idea in local elections, and the actual possibilities at that time for establishing a Women's Party.

Second, the article will study the extent to which women were nominated and elected in these first elections. We shall try to identify those structural barriers in the political system which hindered female participation. What opportunities did women have to be elected, and what variations were there according to regions, types of institution, different electoral systems, and different political parties? Finally, how did the women's rights movement attempt to overcome these barriers, and with what result?

Two kinds of data will be used: information on the aims and actions of the women's rights movement, and the available electoral statistics for the 1908–20 period. Because of the nature of the questions raised here, the analysis cannot be limited to only one type of election. All elections opened to women during this period constituted a succession of experiences for the actors, and all had an impact on their aims and strategies.

## 2. Women's Organizations and the Suffrage Campaign

The Danish campaign for the women's vote was never as militant as the English, and never won any mass following. Several organizations were involved, of which the largest were the Dansk Kvindesamfund and Landsforbundet for Kvinders Valgret. The *Dansk Kvindesamfund* (Danish Women's Association), founded in 1871, is still in existence.<sup>1</sup> It was part of the women's rights movements which emerged all over Europe and the USA during the latter half of the 19th century. These organizations were primarily concerned with legal reforms such as women's admittance to higher education, positions within the state, and professional careers; legal equality between man and wife, and women's control over their own earnings and property; and the franchise for women. It was characteristic of these movements that they claimed to work in the interest of all women in society.

Like its German counterpart, *Allgemeine deutsche Frauenverein*, but unlike the American movement, Dansk Kvindesamfund hesitated for a long time to demand the vote for women. It feared that such a demand would damage the search for acknowledgement and respectability. Not until 1906 did the organization openly include the franchise in its programme. It had no party affiliation, but the politically active members came predominantly from the political centre or right.

Partly because of this reluctance, *Landsforbundet for Kvinders Valgret* (the National League for Women's Suffrage) was founded in 1907. This organization was dominated by Liberal-Radicals and advocated one claim only: the franchise for women.<sup>2</sup> Between these two organizations there was from the very start a sense of competition and rivalry. Both grew rapidly. In 1908 Landsforbundet had 41 local branches and approximately 5,000 members; in 1912, 150 branches and about 11,000 members. In 1907 Dansk Kvindesamfund had 60 local branches, in 1909 about 6,000 members; and in 1912, 114 branches and about 7,500 members. The recruitment to both came primarily from the middle and upper classes.

In support of the demand for female suffrage, the arguments used were broadly the same as those in other Western countries (cf., e.g., Handbuch 1901–02; Krador 1965; Ramelson 1967; Stanton 1889–1922). At least three main types of arguments can be distinguished:

The first was derived from the natural rights assumption that all men are born equal and with the same inalienable rights. It was argued that logically these also extended to women. The suffrage, or 'no taxation without representation', was one of these rights. This argumentation stressed the

similarities between men and women as human creatures. In terms of these ideas, the suffrage was seen as a *goal in itself*, a simple act of *justice*.

The second type was the *expediency* argument (Kraditor 1965): women should have the vote because the influence of women would improve society. This argument came to predominate in the American and German movements at the turn of the century, although the natural rights argument was still retained. Here, the basic assumption was that women and men were different. Women were supposed to have special qualities and experiences: they were regarded as morally superior, more honest and peaceful, and having more concern for the weak in society. Thus the suffrage was to become a *means*.

The third type of argument is often considered to be part of the first. However, it does contain independent and new elements. According to this argument, women just like other groups such as the farmers and the workers, should have the vote in order to protect their own interests. The basic assumption was that men's and women's interests were partly incompatible, so that only women could defend the interests of women: history had shown that men only looked after their own interests, for example in matrimonial legislation. The extent to which *all* women had common interests was usually not clarified.

The advocates of this argument held that women's position in society had to be changed: the franchise was to be a *means*. These were the feminists, whereas some proponents of the expediency argument advocated no further change in women's traditional role than the granting of the suffrage.

All three types of arguments were used by the Danish women's rights organizations, the first more so by Landsforbundet, the second by Dansk Kvindesamfund. The third argument was seldom used officially: after all, the suffrage had to be granted to women by the ruling class of men.

In 1907 female trade unionists and women connected with the Social Democratic Party formed the Social Democratic Women's Suffrage Association.<sup>3</sup> While these also used all three arguments, they stressed that the vote was first and foremost a means for working class women to join the struggle of their own class. Some members refused to work together with bourgeois women and denied that women had specific interests of their own, even within their class. But there was not a sharp split between the socialists and the women's rights movements as in Germany (Dahlerup 1973).

In Denmark the theoretical argument for the vote was never very clear. The suffrage organizations in the suffrage campaign worked for the vote as

such, not always making clear what the vote was to be used for. They were also divided on the question of whether or not they should in the first instance demand only a limited female suffrage. The existence of limitations in male suffrage meant that suffrage for women 'on the same terms as men' would enfranchise only some groups of women. In Denmark this was a matter of dispute, since until 1908 different classes of tax-payers had different weights in communal elections, while servants were excluded from parliamentary elections until 1915.

Before their enfranchisement, very few women belonged to a political party, and there were no women's sections within the parties. But an increasing number of women joined various voluntary women's associations and women's sections within mixed organizations. However, most of these organizations did not support the demand for suffrage extension nor the later claims for female representation. This increased organizational activity provided some individual women with the possibility of acquiring experience necessary for later recruitment as electoral candidates. But it did not provide a basis for joint action among women, either before or after enfranchisement.

### 3. The First Local Elections

Danish women gained the right to vote gradually. The first legislative proposal advocating women's suffrage was introduced in the 1880s, but during the next 20 years, this and other bills were all ignored or rejected by Parliament. When the Liberal-Agrarians came to power in 1901 with an extensive reform programme, introduction of universal and equal suffrage became an issue although suffrage extension was never made a main question, always being mixed with other constitutional reforms.

In 1903, even before Dansk Kvindesamfund had placed the suffrage question on their programme, Danish women received the right to vote for and be elected to the new *parish councils* (Menighedsråd): the principle of universal suffrage was introduced in Denmark for the first time. When introducing the bill, the Minister of Culture and Education said in Parliament that 'women were included, both the married and the unmarried, because women much more than men have religious feelings and are interested in problems concerning the Church'.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, we have very little information about the first elections to parish councils, except for some turn-out data.

In 1907 Danish women were enfranchised and became eligible for membership on the new *Social Aid Boards* (Hjælpekasser), a social relief

authority established in every commune in order to give financial help without the humiliating effect of the Poor Law. The boards were to be elected every third year. The right to vote was granted to every man and woman who paid income tax. Married women were considered tax-payers if their husbands had paid. Thus, women were at first given the right to vote in areas which were considered acceptable fields of activity for their sex.

In 1908 women won the right to vote for and be elected to the reformed *commune councils*.<sup>5</sup> This was what the suffrage movement had been demanding for some years, and it was seen as an important step towards the parliamentary vote. The commune councils were elected every 4 years, and the suffrage requirements were almost the same as those for the Social Aid Boards.<sup>6</sup>

Both of these elections were based on the principle of proportional representation. The voters could choose only between the lists of candidates put up by the various nominating organizations and political parties. Not until 1925 could the voter make preferences among the individual candidates on the lists for the commune councils. The position of the candidates on the lists was therefore decisive. This was a matter decided solely by the nominating organisation.

#### 4. The Strategy of the Women's Rights Movement

In the first elections to the Social Aid Boards and the commune councils, the women's rights movement agitated among women in order to persuade them to participate. This was important, since many politicians had declared that their attitude towards women's parliamentary enfranchisement depended on how women behaved in the local elections. To behave well, however, probably meant not only that female turnout ought to be high, but also that women should not cause any disturbance in the nominating process or in electoral outcome.

The next problem was how to get women elected. In Dansk Kvindesamfund the goal was evident from the very start: women should have half the seats. It appears that many activists hoped and actually believed that this goal would be achieved within a few years after enfranchisement. The years to come, however, soon made it clear that the Danish suffrage organizations, as in so many other countries, were unprepared and could not agree upon a policy of how to act after the vote was won.

After some discussion, Dansk Kvindesamfund made its first move and stated as a general principle that *women had to join the political parties as*

*soon as possible* if they were to have any influence in politics. Only a few members opposed this policy. At the 1908 congress a resolution was passed which declared that:

- Dansk Kvindesamfund is a non-political association
- the local organizations of Dansk Kvindesamfund should encourage their members to join political parties according to their own convictions
- the local organizations ought not present their own independent Women's Party or list – 'except in case of emergency' (which was added after separate voting).

The 1909 congress again appealed to women to join the parties, but on this occasion nothing was said about women's lists. The fact was that many local organizations had presented such lists, in spite of the 1908 resolution.

In these first elections, politically active women soon learnt that there was a gap between formal right and real opportunity. The nominations were dominated partly by local branches of the national political parties (especially in the large towns), partly by small local organizations such as farmers' or fishermen's associations, or religious or temperance societies – all almost exclusively male. It had been believed that nominating organizations – even if male-dominated – would feel obliged to put women on their lists. But this was soon proved not to be the case.

Faced with this dilemma, many of Dansk Kvindesamfund's local branches simply gave in, but others worked hard to further women's representation. One source permits a reconstruction of what really happened at the local level. Short reports from local branches were printed in Dansk Kvindesamfund's journal *Kvinden og Samfundet* (Woman and Society, KvS), although this was done quite unsystematically. This source reveals the different strategies used by the active local branches. The most important were:

1. The local branch merely appealed to the political parties and other nominating organizations to include women on their lists.
2. The local branch further made up a list of women who were willing to accept nomination, and sent this list to the organizations.
3. The local branch decided to act on its own as a nominating organization.

The result of the third strategy varied from place to place. In a few communes the local branch of Dansk Kvindesamfund simply joined a single uncontested list for the commune, with candidates representing all the participating organizations.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, the local branch drew up a joint list with a selected number of other organizations, usually the bourgeois parties, even if this conflicted with Dansk Kvindesamfund's claim



to be independent of party politics.<sup>8</sup> The participation of Dansk Kvindesamfund in forming joint lists cannot usually be seen in the electoral statistics, which contain only the final name of the joint list. Finally, in some instances Dansk Kvindesamfund created an *independent women's list*, in a few cases in cooperation with other local women's organizations.<sup>9</sup> These lists represent a very interesting and nowadays almost forgotten feature of the first elections after enfranchisement, which will be discussed in a later section.

The other large women's rights organization, *Landsforbundet for Kvinders Valgret*, was always against the idea of independent women's lists. It was even opposed to women's organizations recommending women candidates to the parties. In its view, women should just join the political parties as soon as possible. 'Women should not, by making their own lists, deepen the gap between men and women, just when it has become possible to bridge the gap', said Deputy Chairman *Elna Munch* (KvS, 1908/1 and 10-11).

## 5. The Result of the Elections

The first election to the *Social Aid Board* took place in 1908 and had the surprising result that *women made up 35 to 45 per cent of those elected*, according to unofficial electoral statistics.<sup>10</sup> Women's representation was highest in the towns, but also remarkably high in the countryside. Official statistics from the 1911 election shows similar tendencies: In the towns (outside Copenhagen) women got 38 per cent of the seats, in the rural

Table 1. Women elected to the Danish commune councils 1909-37.\* Percentage.

	1909	1913	1917	1921	1925	1929	1933	1937
The capital (København & Fredriksberg)	18	23	19	20	19	18	22	20
Other towns	7	6	6	4	4	4	5	4
Rural districts on the islands	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.6	1.0	0.8
Rural districts in Jutland	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
All Denmark: percentage	1.3	1.6	1.1	0.9	0.8	0.8	1.2	1.0
All Denmark: absolute numbers	127	136	114	98	90	93	135	117

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*

\* The 1921 figures exclude South Jutland, which became Danish in 1920. The first elections for the commune councils were not held here until 1922, and 4 women and 874 men were elected. The figures for 1925 and following years include South Jutland.

communes 33 per cent.<sup>11</sup> For later elections no information is available. After this remarkable result, the first election to the commune councils in 1909 was very disappointing for the women's organizations: women constituted about 1 per cent of those elected (Table 1).<sup>12</sup> The next commune election in 1913 brought only a little improvement, and Dansk Kvinde-samfund began to accept that women's representation would increase only very slowly. Consequently, the result of the 1917 election was a shock: women's representation had actually decreased: 'The 1917 election represents a lost battle for feminism' (KvS 1917/7). During the whole interwar period women's representation remained constantly poor, around 1 per cent.<sup>13</sup>

What do these first elections tell us about women's chances to be elected? The results show that women's representation varied according to the *type of elective institution*. The explanation which most immediately comes to mind is that the Social Aid Boards represented an area in which it was considered acceptable not only for women to vote, but also to be elected. This meant, on the one hand, that women were probably more willing to be nominated, and on the other that the male-dominated nominating organizations were more willing, and found it more advantageous, to place women on their lists. The Social Aid Boards were institutions of minor importance in Danish politics, compared to the commune councils. One may suggest that women's representation varied according to the importance of the institution, as evaluated by the male elites.

Women's chances to be elected increased with increasing *urbanization* (Table 1). In rural districts female representatives were very rare. Even if women's representation was very small in all rural districts, there were systematic differences between rural communes on the islands and in Jutland, the more traditional Western part of Denmark. In the capital, women's representation, on the other hand, reached a high level from the start, and one which was not surpassed until the most recent commune election in 1978.

To what extent did the difference between rural and urban areas reflect different degrees of *politicization*, that is, the degree to which nationally organized political parties had entered the local elections? (Rokkan, 1970; for the Danish case, see Bentzon 1972.) We know that politicization increased with increasing urbanization. That women's representation should also vary seems likely when one considers that the local lists were typically organized around occupational interests.

Table 2 shows the women's share of those elected, when controlling for urbanization and degree of politicization. There seems to be no straight

Table 2. Men and women elected to the commune councils 1909, by degree of politicization and urbanization\*

	Low politicization		Middle politicization		High politicization		Total	
Rural communes	Men	5071	Men	1853	Men	2042	Men	8966
	Women	22	Women	35	Women	8	Women	65
	Women %	0.4	Women %	1.9	Women %	0.4	Women %	0.7
Urban communes	Men	54	Men	460	Men	233	Men	747
	Women	0	Women	23	Women	29	Women	52
	Women %	–	Women %	5.0	Women %	12.4	Women %	7.0

\* the capital area is omitted.

*Low politicization*: all communes with only one list (uncontested election) or only local lists.

*Middle politicization*: all communes with lists by national organized political parties and local lists.

*High politicization*: all communes with lists only by national organized political parties.

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*.

pattern of differences by level of politicization in rural areas. In urban areas the proportion of women is highest in communes with high politicization, but this pattern did not appear in the next elections.

Table 3 shows that the opportunity for women to be elected varied to some degree even between the four large national *political parties*. It is remarkable that in the 1909 and 1913 commune elections in Copenhagen every second candidate on the Radical-Liberal lists was a woman. However, differences were much smaller between the political parties than between urban and rural districts *within the same party*. This again brings out the urban-rural dimension as the most decisive factor.

Table 3. Women elected on the lists of the four large political parties: The 1917 commune election

	Social Democrats			Conservatives			Liberal-Agrarian			Radical Liberals		
	Men	Wo-men	% of wo-men	Men	Wo-men	% of wo-men	Men	Wo-men	% of wo-men	Men	Wo-men	% of wo-men
The capital	32	5	13,5	21	6	22,2	0	0	–	6	2	25,0
other towns	317	19	5,6	82	5	5,7	45	1	2,1	47	2	4,0
Rural districts on the islands	508	5	1,2	325	2	0,6	822	5	0,6	687	5	0,7
Rural districts in Jutland	380	2	0,5	98	1	1,0	770	2	0,3	170	2	1,2
All Denmark	1327	32	2,5	525	14	2,6	1637	8	0,5	910	11	1,2

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*

## 6. The Women's Lists at the Local Elections

The women's lists for the first elections to the Social Aid Boards and the commune councils can be seen as an attempt to break the monopoly of the male-dominated organizations, which usually were most unwilling to nominate women. In addition, it is clear that many women did not feel at home in the political parties and organizations, which, they stressed, had usually been established before women had the right to participate. They felt that they did not have the possibility to enter the parties on their own terms. As an illustration it can be mentioned that there were women who sought nomination on the lists of various parties on the condition that they did not have to become members – which the parties naturally refused, considering their own interests.

Table 4 shows that in the commune election of 1909, there were 41 women's lists, electing 12 per cent of all elected women, even if they only constituted 1 per cent of all lists. Women's lists were formed in towns as well as in rural districts, but never in the capital. During the next years the number of women's lists declined. The decrease in the number of elected women in 1917 (Table 1) was largely due to the decline of women's lists.

Why did the women's lists disappear? Was it because the existence of such a list or even the threat of its formation encouraged the parties to include more women on their lists? In that case, the disappearance of the women's lists would have been regarded by many as a fulfilment of their purpose. The fact that women's representation did not increase, however, shows that the women's lists did not have this effect.

The majority of the lists of 1909 were not presented in the 1913 election. A spot check of those in the towns outside Copenhagen shows an ambi-

Table 4. Women's lists in the Danish commune elections 1909–37.

	Number of Women's Lists	Women's lists % of total no of lists	Women and Men elected on Women's Lists		Women elected on Women's Lists. % of all women elected
			W	M	
1909	41	1,0	15	8	12
1913	37	0,8	15	4	11
1917	14	0,3	2	7	2
1921	3	0,1	0	1	–
1925	1	0,1	0	0	–
1929	3	0,1	0	0	–
1933	6	0,1	0	0	–
1937	1	0,0	0	0	–

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*.

guous pattern of development. In 1909 there were 10 women's lists in urban districts; in the 1913 election only 3. In some communes, the 1909 lists disappeared in 1913, while women were elected on other lists in the commune. In other cases, however, the women's lists disappeared, even if women had not been given a position on other lists that would almost certainly guarantee them election. Further, the disappearance of the lists in 1913 shows no clear relation as to whether they won any seats in 1909.

The women's lists seem to have disappeared first and foremost because of *lack of support*. It had become clear that women as a bloc did not support them, despite the hopes of the local branches of Dansk Kvindesamfund and the fears of the parties. In some communes the women's lists received astonishingly few votes in relation to female turnout. Dansk Kvindesamfund was forced to realize that even if the organization itself thought that it represented all women, women as a whole did not. Women's lists also received very little support from the political press. Public opinion seemed to be against the experiment. Even the national organization of Dansk Kvindesamfund did not support the idea. A strategy that would improve women's poor representation had still not been found when women finally gained the parliamentary vote in 1915.

## 7. A Women's Party in Parliament?

Because of the war, the next election was postponed until 1918. During the interim there was a long and vehement debate within the women's rights organizations about aims and strategy. The disappointing experiences of the local elections sharpened the debate.

The first question was whether the organization that had fought for the suffrage should now close down. For those who had advocated the franchise as simply an act of justice and a goal in itself the struggle was now over. Some did not even regard it as important to have women elected. Landsforbundet for Kvinders Valgret decided to close down in 1915. The chairman of the organization, *Johanne Rambush*, stressed that women now had to learn to see their demands as problems of the whole society (Kvindevalgret, 1915/10). Some Landsforbundet activists later entered party politics and fought for women's issues in Parliament. *Elna Munch* is one example (Petersen 1965).

Those for whom the suffrage was a *means* continued. Within Dansk Kvindesamfund at least three principal standpoints were expressed between 1915 and 1918, although the debate was never very concise:

- 1) There were those who still thought that women ought to become

members of the political parties, although their belief in the political parties seemed to have diminished after the experiences of the local elections. The advocates of this strategy, however, maintained that women had begun to join the parties, and that women in fact had voted along party lines at the first local elections. Those members of Dansk Kvindesamfund who themselves had found their way into a political party were usually among the advocates of this line, but many others also felt that there was no other way for women to gain influence, particularly because the introduction of proportional representation had strengthened the position of the parties within the political system.

2) Others expressed the view that an effort should be made to destroy an immoral party system, and suggested establishing a 'non-political party' for all voters who wished to achieve this.

3) Third, there was the idea of forming an *Independent Women's Party*. Very few directly supported the idea, but it was a possibility underlying the whole discussion. 'Always think about it, never talk about it', said Gyrithe Lemche, one of the leaders of Dansk Kvindesamfund (KvS 1915/13). A Women's Party was, according to her, 'the weapon feminism had to take up if it could not progress by peaceful means' (KvS 1915/11).

*Maurice Duverger* has argued that 'A women's political party would sanction the discrimination to which it was nominally opposed' (Duverger, 1955:116). However, the problem is not as simple as that. The ideas behind a Women's Party can be illuminated by tracing them back to the different attitudes towards women's suffrage and ultimately to general attitudes about the position of women in society.

In the debate some considered a Women's Party to be the same as women's lists at the local elections, simply as a means to get women nominated and elected where advancement through the parties was denied. *Representation of women was about to develop into a goal in itself*. To many a Women's Party was seen as something more, namely as a channel through which women could enter the political system *on their own terms*.

Gyrithe Lemche expressed the view this way:

'To me the goal of feminism has never been to make women equal with men – i.e. the purely formal legal equality, which I in no way underestimate – but just as much to find the way to the essentially feminine, that which a defective and incomplete order of society has obstructed and distorted for thousands of years, in order to liberate it from all false traditions and give it a place in the new society with the same natural conditions of growth as the masculine. But a precondition for the essence of femininity to come into its own is, firstly, that it be conscious of itself and

its own merits, and secondly, that it be allowed to find its own way in freedom without obligations towards the traditions of the past. To me feminism has not, as it has to many others, meant an offshoot of the democratic movement; it has meant something unique with its own goals, far beyond the formal equalization and with its own commitments. Therefore, I have never recognized the dogma that women *must* join one of the political parties created by men'. (KvS, 1918/20–22).

This leaves us with two possibilities. If women's suffrage and representation were seen as a means to use women's special abilities and special experiences to improve society, a Women's Party could be a relevant means. It might even be considered a *permanent institution*, which could immunise women against the dirt of party politics. If women's suffrage and women's representation first and foremost were primarily considered as a means of furthering women's interests, then a Women's Party became equally relevant. For the advocates of this argument, it was never just a question of securing more women representatives, but of placing *feminists* in parliament and local councils. The local elections had taught that not all women were feminists. But for the feminists, a Women's Party would primarily be a *temporary* arrangement in a transitional phase.

The debate within Dansk Kvindesamfund reached no general agreement. Characteristically, the 1916 congress merely passed a resolution stating that Dansk Kvindesamfund would leave it to individual members to decide how they would seek influence in Danish politics. But it was no coincidence that the appeal to join the parties was not issued again (KvS, 1916/12).

What did politically active women outside Dansk Kvindesamfund think of the idea? The women who had found their way into the political parties usually rejected the idea of a Women's Party. The socialists argued that the advocates of a Women's Party overlooked the class divisions in society. Women on the right, for their part, expressed some sympathy for the idea, but on the other hand felt strongly that they had very little in common with socialists. In fact, their main goal was to fight socialism.<sup>14</sup> *The advocates of a Women's Party, in fact, usually belonged to the middle of the political spectrum.*

## 8. The First Parliamentary Elections

The first parliamentary elections under the new Constitution occurred in 1918. The *Folketing*, the lower chamber, was elected in single member constituencies, modified by some supplementary seats. As an exception, the Copenhagen seats were elected by proportional representation. In

1920 PR was introduced over the whole country. The *Landsting*, the upper chamber, was elected indirectly, PR. The elections to both houses were now based on universal suffrage, but with a higher voting age for the upper House. The Folketing was the center of legislation, but a law still needed the consent of both Houses.

All four large political parties in Denmark issued statements supporting women's legal equality and a few other feminist issues – always in rather noncommittal terms. The parties, however, did not seem to care much about this new group of voters. They knew from the local elections that they had no reason to fear that the voters of women would change the relative strength of the parties.

Apart from these appeals, there is no written evidence of any collective action by women within the parties to further the nomination of women or to influence party policy on women's issues. Their activity was aimed more at the mobilization of women as voters and as party members. The women's sections were established within the large Danish political parties in the 1920's and 1930's; their primary aim was also to extend the female rank and file (Dahlerup 1978).

## 9. The Strategy of the Women's Rights Movement

Even if Dansk Kvindesamfund did not reach an agreement on an alternative channel of representation for women, it did try to improve female representation within the political parties. It asked the parties to consider the feminist demands when drawing up their party platforms. It questioned the parties' candidates during the electoral campaign as to their attitude towards equal pay, women's admittance to all public offices, legal equality between husband and wife, and many other feminist demands. In this way it hoped that the female electorate would prefer candidates who supported feminist demands. Because it wanted to stay neutral with regard to party politics, it dared not recommend certain parties. Nevertheless, Dansk Kvindesamfund was heavily attacked for these activities. It was argued that women's organizations ought not interfere with the elections once the suffrage had been granted.

Dansk Kvindesamfund further invited a number of important women from the four large political parties to a meeting in order to discuss how to further the representation of women. Women from three of the parties did turn up. By contrast, the Social Democrat, *Nina Bang*, later to become the first woman minister in the Western world, characteristically answered that they worked only within their own party. The women from the other



parties advised Dansk Kvindesamfund *not* to propose its own candidates to the political parties, as it had often done in the local elections.

For the election to the *Landsting*, Dansk Kvindesamfund drew up a special plan to further women's representation. The first aim was that women should take over one third of the seats in the electoral colleges, which consisted of a total of 2976 electors. This was an enormous task that meant intervening at all levels in the electoral process from the nomination meetings in the local party branches through the public election of electors to the complicated bargaining between the electors of the various parties. The electoral statistics give no information about the sex of electors. But according to Dansk Kvindesamfund it had not been difficult to get women elected as electors, and in all about 400 of the 2976 electors were women – less than 14%, but still a surprisingly large number.

The next step in the plan was to compile a list of women, 31 in all, who were members of some political party and willing to be nominated. These were all known as good feminists. The list was made in spite of the warnings from female leaders within the parties. It was sent to both the parties and all women electors in order to make them work for the final election of women.

When the final election was held, 5 women were elected to the *Landsting* out of a total of 72 (18 of whom were appointed by the outgoing *Landsting*). Only one of these had been on the list. For the organization this result was a further tremendous disappointment.

The parties attacked Dansk Kvindesamfund for having tried to force women electors to vote for a woman in the final election, even if it meant betraying their own party. From Dansk Kvindesamfund's point of view, the action had failed because cooperation among women stopped after the election of electors.

The disappointing results caused a bitter political debate within Dansk Kvindesamfund. The final result was that Gyrithe Lemche, then editor of the organization's journal and chairman of the executive committee, retired along with the administrative leader, Thora Daugaard, and the chairman Astrid Stampe Feddersen. The latter expressed her feelings about the elections as follows:

'When I saw how many representatives the *temperance movement* – which like Dansk Kvindesamfund is not affiliated with party politics – has put into Parliament, whereas *feminism* did not get any declared representative elected, it filled me with both sorrow and shame'. (KvS 1918/12).

From this time onwards, Dansk Kvindesamfund abandoned all ideas of establishing a Women's Party separate from the existing political parties. As part of its changing strategy, the Dansk Kvindesamfund decided in 1919 not to send its own proposals for women candidates to the political parties for the 1920 election.<sup>15</sup>

Enfranchisement changed the position of Dansk Kvindesamfund. Before 1908 and even during the first local elections, the political parties – at least the non-socialist parties – to some extent regarded the organization as the representative of women. The first elections, however, made it clear that all women did not feel represented by Dansk Kvindesamfund, and consequently the parties began to stress more openly that they did not desire the interference of the organization in elections. A similar development affected the women's rights movement in Germany after enfranchisement (Evans 1976).

## 10. The Electoral Results

Women constituted less than 3 per cent of the representatives in the Folketing after the first election, a proportion which did not improve during the whole interwar period (Table 5). In the Landsting elections of this period, women received from 3 to 8 seats, or from 4 to 11 per cent of the total, a somewhat higher proportion than in the Folketing. Compared to the commune elections, women's representation at the parliamentary level had improved somewhat.<sup>16</sup>

Table 5. Women elected to the Danish Folketing, 1918–39.

	The capital			Outside the capital			All Denmark		
	No. of rep.	Wo-men rep.	% of wo-men	No. of rep.	Wo-men rep.	% of wo-men	No. of rep.	Wo-men rep.	% of wo-men
1918	24	3	13	116	1	1	140	4	3
1920, April	24	3	13	116	0	–	140	3	2
1920, July	24	3	13	116	0	–	140	3	2
1920, Sept.	24	3	13	125	0	–	149	3	2
1924	24	3	13	125	0	–	149	3	2
1926	24	3	13	125	0	–	149	3	2
1929	24	3	13	125	1	1	149	4	3
1932	24	3	13	125	1	1	149	4	3
1935	24	2	8	125	1	1	149	3	2
1939	24	2	8	125	1	1	149	3	2

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*

Table 6. Women candidates for the elections to the Danish Folketing, 1918–39.

	The capital			Outside the capital			All Denmark		
	No. of candidates	Women candidates	% of women	No. of candidates	Women candidates	% of women	No. of candidates	Women candidates	% of women
1918	140	33	24	262	4	2	402	37	9
1920, April	98	15	15	340	3	1	438	18	4
1920, July	94	15	16	343	2	1	437	17	4
1920, Sept.	94	15	16	377	4	1	471	19	4
1924	97	13	13	401	3	1	498	16	3
1926	80	14	18	399	2	1	479	16	3
1929	85	11	13	420	5	1	505	16	3
1932	94	11	12	497	5	1	591	16	3
1935	98	10	10	624	10	2	722	20	3
1939	129	18	14	703	12	2	832	30	4

Source: *Statistiske Meddelelser*.

What can these first parliamentary elections after enfranchisement tell us about women's chances of being elected?

As in the local elections, we find clear *regional differences* in women's representation in elections to the Folketing. But here the dividing line is not between rural and urban areas, but between the metropolitan area and the rest of the country. Table 6 shows that 33 out of a total of 37 women candidates in the 1918 election were nominated in Copenhagen: while 35 per cent of all candidates were nominated in Copenhagen, as many as 89 per cent of the *women* candidates stood for election there. Again, in 1918, 17 per cent of all representatives were elected in Copenhagen, against 75 per cent of all *women* representatives.

One could ask whether the *electoral* system had any independent influence on women's chances of being nominated and elected. In the debate within the women's organizations it was often said that the parties dared not nominate women as candidates in single-member constituencies. They feared that men – and perhaps many women too – would in consequence vote for another party. Under a PR system, the voters would always be able to vote for a man.

Similar suggestions have been made about women's relatively poor representation in countries with single-member constituencies, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Canada (Means 1973; Duverger 1955). The present German electoral system seems to be the best supporting case for this hypothesis, since women have a higher proportion of

Table 7. Women elected to the Danish Folketing 1918-39. Distribution among parties

	The whole Folketing		Social Democrats		Radical-Liberals		Conservatives		Liberal Agrarian		Others*		
	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	No. of rep.	Wo-men % of wo-men rep.	
1918	140	4	3	39	1	3	31	1	3	45	0	3	0
1920-I	140	3	2	42	1	2	17	1	6	48	0	5	0
1920-II	140	3	2	42	1	2	16	1	6	51	0	5	0
1920-III	149	3	2	48	1	2	18	1	6	51	0	5	0
1924	149	3	2	55	1	2	20	1	5	44	0	2	0
1926	149	3	2	53	1	2	16	1	6	46	0	4	0
1929	149	4	3	61	1	2	16	1	6	43	1	5	0
1932	149	4	3	62	1	2	14	1	7	38	1	8	0
1935	149	3	2	68	1	2	14	0	-	28	1	13	0
1939	149	3	2	64	1	2	14	0	-	30	1	15	0

\* This includes mandates from the Faroe Islands and Greenland as well as the Justice (single tax) party, Nazi party, 'Economic' party, German Minority party, Agrarians and Communists.

those members of the Bundestag elected by PR than among those elected in single-member constituencies (Fülles 1969). The Danish case does not confirm this hypothesis. The change in the electoral system outside Copenhagen from 1918 to 1929 did not bring about an increasing number of women candidates and representatives. There were still almost no women at all!<sup>17</sup>

Table 7 shows women's representation within the various *political parties*. The highest proportion is found in the Conservative and the Radical-Liberal parties, the lowest within the Liberal-Agrarian party, the latter being a rural party. This corresponds largely to the distribution in the local elections. A closer look at the figures, however, indicates that the pattern seems more likely to be that every party (the Liberal-Agrarian not until later) assured the election of at least *one woman*. The number of women candidates varied from party to party. For instance, the Social Democratic party always had rather few women candidates. But that party, like the others, usually placed one woman in a safe seat. In terms of theories of representation, this means that women were conceived as a social category. One woman was considered sufficient to represent the views of women as such. By contrast, the women's rights movement had demanded that the assemblies should mirror the proportion of men and women in the population, either as a simple act of justice, or as the only possible means of changing political life according to women's views.

## 11. Conclusion

In the years immediately after enfranchisement there were women who felt that female suffrage could have changed established political life, that it ought to have meant more than merely doubling the number of voters. There were, however, considerable differences among politically active women in their conception of aims and strategies. Special emphasis has been placed on the ideas behind the concept of a *Women's Party*. For some, this party was simply considered to be a means of furthering women's representation against male opposition. For others, the Women's Party was a channel through which women could introduce new goals or even new conflict dimensions into the party system.

The concept of a Women's Party was known in other countries in the years after enfranchisement. In *England*, one of the leading suffragettes, Christabel Pankhurst, was a candidate in a single-member constituency in 1918 for a new 'Women's Party' with a feminist and patriotic programme (Brooks 1967). In *Sweden*, an independent women's list was presented in

the commune council election of 1927 and in the election for the Lower House in 1928. The outcome was a fiasco (Torbacke 1969). In *Norway*, a women's list participated in the 1918 parliamentary election without success: the same was true of the Women's Party which contested the 1928 commune election in Oslo (Agerholt 1937; Means 1973). In *Germany* during the 1920's, forming a Women's Party was discussed within the women's rights movement, but without result (Bremme 1956; see the discussion in the journal *Die Frau*, especially Jahrg. 32, 1925).

It is difficult to suggest conditions under which a Women's Party could have been successful. *First*, the existence of a well-established party system seems to counteract the idea. In Denmark the party system was already established and there seemed to be no room for a Women's Party. In the Danish *local* elections, the women's lists disappeared as the degree of politicization increased. However, a closer examination shows no connection between the degree of politicization in a commune and the existence of a women's list. After all, the established local lists also usually represented occupational interests. The conclusion seems to be that an established system of parties and other nominating organizations expressing fundamental economic cleavages counteracted the idea of a Women's Party. This raises the question whether the possibilities of a Women's Party will increase today in those countries where the party system is being loosened from its former class basis.<sup>18</sup>

*Second*, in order to succeed, a Women's Party required feelings of common interests among women and the development of a female group consciousness. Ideologically, women were seen as forming a category of their own. This could have been a basis for women to form a united front in politics. It was, however, part of this role not to be engaged in politics and not to act in concert with other women, but to follow the authority of the husband or father. Further, class identification seems to have been a strong barrier, even if all women were underprivileged in relation to the men of their own class. By contrast to other oppressed groups, women were isolated from each other. Their societal position did not offer many possibilities for a Women's Party, either then or later.

Why was it so difficult *to get women elected*? At the time it was often stated that poor electoral representation was their own fault. This statement, however, overlooks the enormous barriers that impeded access up the political ladder.

Analytically, women's low representation on the one hand reflects women's lack of resources, inclusive of motivational resources (Martinsen 1973); on the other, it reflects the structural barriers in the political

system – or what Rokkan (1970:217) has called the number of structurally set openings for formal participation.

The most important barriers to women were found in the rural areas, where they were tightly bound to their homes: a traditional norm system did not permit women any possibility of entering politics. In short, the rural districts represented a separate political culture distinct from that of the towns, especially of the capital.

Women's representation through the parties was hindered because they were not considered to represent the socio-economic interests on which the party system was based. Women, on their side, did not identify with these interests to the same extent as men.

In the current debate, it has often been said that the parties want to have one woman on their lists in every constituency in order to attract women voters. This indicates on the one hand that it is difficult to have more than one or only a few women nominated on every list. On the other hand, it means that some women can be nominated even if they have fewer qualifications than the men they compete with. This model of political decoys (Christensen 1976) *did not* apply to the situation in the countryside in these early years. In most rural districts there were no women candidates at all.

This fact probably not only reflects women's lack of the required traditional resources for political participation. In the countryside *being of male sex itself constituted a resource in the competition for seats*. It is an interesting question to what extent and at which levels this is still so.

Women's representation in local and parliamentary elections did not improve during the whole interwar period: a similar standstill was seen in other countries. Not until after World War II did the number of elected women increase. In the most recent decade, the increase has been considerable. Comparative studies of this recent development could contribute fruitfully to a further understanding of what determines women's degree of representation.

It is the irony of history – and perhaps not a mere coincidence – that the recent increase in women's representation has occurred at a time when there seems to be a tendency towards a decline of, or at least a fundamental change in, the functions of parliaments. Cooperation between interest organizations and the bureaucracy has occupied a more central role in the political system. Analyses have shown that in these new patterns women's representation is next to nothing.

## NOTES

- 1 The material for this study of Dansk Kvindesamfund is taken from the journal of the organization, *Kvinden og Samfundet* (first issue 1885), and from the minutes of their meetings and other documents, placed in the archives of Dansk Kvindesamfund at the State Library in Aarhus. Another important source is the Jubilee Publications (Lemche 1912; Lading 1939).
- 2 The history of Landsforbundet has not yet been written. Information used in this article is taken mainly from the journal of the organization, *Kvindevalgret* (1908–1915).
- 3 In 1908 the association asked to be admitted to the Social Democratic party. The party refused, saying that 'there is only one working class movement, and thus no room for a special women's movement or a separate Women's Party among working class women'. The association continued to exist under the name of Socialdemokratisk Kvindeforening (Social Democratic Women's Association). In the following years there were several controversies between the association and the party. Information about the relationship has been found in The Labour Movement Library and Archive in Copenhagen.
- 4 *Rigsdagstidende*, 1901/02, Folketinget, I, p. 790.
- 5 The country was at that time divided into 1212 communes, (rural forming the overwhelming majority), each governed by an elected council. The citizens paid tax directly to the commune.
- 6 In the 1909 election to the commune councils, 69 per cent of the population aged over 25 had the right to vote. Because of women's lower wages, more men than women could vote: cf. *Statistiske Meddelelser*, 4.R, 31.B, 5.H, 1909, p. 85 f.
- 7 See, e.g., the 1908 election to the Social Aid Board in Bering (KvS 1908/8).
- 8 See, e.g., the 1908 election to the Social Aid Board in Ringkjøbing (KvS 1908/9).
- 9 See, e.g. the 1909 election to the commune councils in Hjørring (KvS 1909/20) and that of 1913 in Marvede (KvS 1913/6).
- 10 *Tidsskrift for Forsørgelsesvæsen og Filantropi*, 1908, pp. 225–37. This contains the results from 283 rural and 48 urban communes, respectively 1/4 and 2/3 of the total of each type of commune.
- 11 *Statistiske Efterretninger*, 1911, no. 8, records the results for all communes. There is no information about candidates nor about the lists.
- 12 There are no statistics about the number and sex of the candidates and their distribution on the different lists in the commune elections before 1929.
- 13 The official electoral statistics on the commune elections can be found in *Statistiske Meddelelser*. These data are collected in the *Danish Statistical Commune Data Archive*. Table 1 and Tables 3–4 are calculated directly from the electoral statistics. Table 2 is based on the data of the Commune Data Archive. There are small differences between these two sources, probably due to coding errors.
- 14 See the discussions in *Dansk Kvindeblad* (founded 1913), an independent journal of conservative women. When the Conservative Party split in 1917, the journal supported the short lived patriotic New Right Party and died together with it.
- 15 During and after World War II, the idea of forming a Women's Party was again raised, but Dansk Kvindesamfund never again seriously considered the idea. In the commune elections of 1946 the number of women's lists increased to 25, only to fall again. At this time there was a long public debate on women's low representation. The history of the 1946 women's lists has not been studied here.
- 16 The fact that women's representation was better in parliamentary elections may simply reflect the fact that in parliamentary elections Copenhagen's proportion of those elected was higher than in elections for the commune councils. For instance, in the 1918 Folketing election, 17 per cent of all representatives were elected in the capital area, against only 0.7 per cent in the 1917 commune election.
- 17 Eduards (1977) has underlined that the differences between the two electoral systems in



terms of women's chances to be nominated and elected should not be exaggerated. Means (1973) has shown that in Norway women have the best chances to be nominated and elected on the lists of strong parties in large constituencies.

- 18 A recent Icelandic study shows an interesting exception to the history of unsuccessful women's parties (Styrkarsdóttir 1978). Women's lists did well in both local and parliamentary elections between 1908 and 1926. A party system based upon economic cleavages was not yet fully developed, and voters did not have the opportunity to identify with parties which unambiguously represented fundamental economic interests.

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