

The Promise of Universalism – Gender, Migration, and the Limits of the Nordic Welfare State

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The Scandinavian countries are often praised for their highly developed welfare states and political implementation of universalism, human rights and gender equality as core values.¹ Globalization and international migration have recently started increasing cultural diversities in the Nordic countries and have led to a growing political, public and media attention for immigration issues – especially in Denmark.² In recent years, Danish immigration policies have caused controversies and criticism in an international context. In 2018, new integration laws were introduced by the conservative and liberal government addressing problems in certain suburban Danish neighborhoods which were officially labelled *ghettos*. A 2018 law banning the Islamic veiling in the public sphere falls into the same line of restrictive integration laws.³ Restrictive immigration policy in Denmark was also a focal point in the latest parliamentary elections. After years in opposition, the Danish Social Democrats claimed victory in national elections in 2019 by employing a radical and restrictive approach to immigration.⁴

These recent developments can, however, not be seen as singular shifts in policy. Immigration issues have experienced an unusually strong political mobilization in Denmark.⁵ Between 1983 and 2002, Denmark has developed from an extraordinarily liberal to one of the most restrictive migration regimes in Europe.⁶ At the same time, public and political discourses on immigration in Europe have increasingly become connected to gender equality concerns.⁷ In public debates on immigration, an agenda is emerging which aims at countering violations of women's rights, Islamic veiling, honor related violence and forced marriages.⁸

In Denmark, gender equality is perceived as a distinctive characteristic of a common "Nordic identity"⁹. Since the 1980s, nationalist belongings and narratives in Denmark have been deeply embedded in the model of the universalist welfare state and the centrality of gender equality and women-friendly politics. In the course of an increase of immigration, gender equality and sexual politics have been highlighted by nationalist and populist political parties and in the mainstream public and political discourse.¹⁰ In the light of the Danish welfare state's fundamental premises, i.e. universalism, gender equality and social rights, restrictive immigration and integration legislation and the strengthening of political and societal exclusive anti-immigration forces seem ironic. Thus, it is a

1 Cf. Christiansen. Nordic Model of Welfare, p. 10f.

2 Cf. Siim. Gender, Diversity and Migration, p. 615f.

3 Cf. "Denmark Passes Law". The Guardian (May 31, 2018).

4 Cf. Nedergaard. Back to its Roots, p. 2.

5 Cf. Siim. Gender, Diversity and Migration, p. 620.

6 Cf. Siim. Dilemmas in Danish Citizenship, p. 495.

7 See e.g. Hark & Villa. Unterscheiden und Herrschen. Ein Essay zu den ambivalenten Verflechtungen von Rassismus, Sexismus und Feminismus in der Gegenwart, Bielefeld 2017.

8 Cf. Skejeie & Siim. Multicultural Challenges to State Feminism in Denmark, p. 323.

9 Cf. Siim. Gender, Diversity and Migration, p. 616.

10 Cf. Yilmaz. From Immigrant Worker to Muslim Immigrant, p. 38.

major objective of this paper to address the apparently contradictory interrelations of the universalist gender and welfare model in Denmark and the country's gendered discourse on immigration. How have political, public and media discourses shaped a welfare model of exclusive solidarity by using gendered anti-immigration narratives in Denmark since the 1980s and throughout the 1990s and early 2000s? How have discourses on gender norms in immigrant communities been used as a narrative of social and national belonging in Denmark?

1. Universalism, Equality and State Feminism

According to comparative welfare state research, the Nordic countries represent a specific model of Social Democratic welfare. A strong state, welfare benefits financed by taxes and the principle of universalism are at the core of this system.¹¹ Fundamental work on the Nordic system of welfare was undertaken by Gøsta Esping-Andersen. According to Esping-Andersen, the expansion of social rights can be viewed as essential to the welfare state in general and to the Social Democratic model specifically as it “diminishes citizens’ status as ‘commodities’”¹². He argues that social rights enable people to live independently of pure market forces. For Esping-Andersen, ensuring equality has always been key to welfare states.¹³ The Scandinavian welfare system takes care of families, transfers grants to children, offers child and elderly care and consequently enables women to actively participate in the labor market. Accordingly, the Social Democratic welfare regimes are categorized as states combining liberalism and socialism.¹⁴ The immense costs of a solidary and universal welfare state can only be balanced by maximizing revenue income and achieving full employment. The “fusion of welfare and work”¹⁵, as Esping-Andersen puts it, is the most salient trait of the system.¹⁶

Electoral support for the Danish welfare state has always been high and the welfare system in Denmark is highly politically entrenched – across party lines.¹⁷ However, not only political and institutional factors have led to the unshaken support for welfare politics in Denmark: Since everyone benefits by a universal model and, in turn, everyone is expected to contribute, a universal solidarity in favor of the welfare state is established. This view is supported by Svendsen and Svendsen who argue that the presence of *social trust* in the Scandinavian societies explains the economic success of the concept. The Social Democratic welfare state prescribes that it is important to contribute to the common financial pool on which welfare benefits rely on.¹⁸ The universalistic welfare model is principally inclusive of everyone living lawfully in the country: “The welfare state is designed to take care of all who need support within the national boundaries.”¹⁹ Some argue that the generous model of Nordic welfare could easily be undermined by a lack of funding through taxes and that it

11 Cf. Christiansen. Nordic Model of Welfare, p. 11f.

12 Esping-Andersen. Three Worlds of Welfare, p. 3.

13 Cf. *ibid.* p. 95.

14 Cf. *ibid.* p. 28.

15 Esping-Andersen. Three Worlds of Welfare, p. 47.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Cf. Green-Pedersen & Baggesen-Klitgaard. Development of the Danish Welfare State, p. 139ff.

18 Cf. Svendsen & Svendsen. Scandinavian Welfare State and Social Trust, p. 93ff.

19 Brochmann. Welfare State, Integration and Legitimacy, p. 7.

necessitates selection of potential new members of the *national community* as only the taxpayers are in the position to provide stability and social security.²⁰

Gender equality has been an integral part of the Nordic model of welfare. As regards political activity, labor market participation and social rights, Denmark is considered a model state in terms of gender equality.²¹ Female labor market representation has been one of the main objectives since the 1970s; however, the Nordic countries also addressed men and their role as providers of care in the family. Hence, the Nordic countries focused on the promotion of both a *dual-earner* and a *dual-career* system. In order to facilitate female employment, childcare financed by the state was introduced. Parental leave options for both parents were meant to assure a care-sharing form of parenthood.²² The Nordic concept of gender equality is deeply connected to other societal changes in the 1970s: The welfare state expanded, and social services were now attained of social rights. Family matters and childcare policies became political concerns as new standards regarding the allocation of childcare responsibilities arose. Public funding of childcare policies was essential to welfare policies in the 1970s.²³

In international comparison, the Danish welfare state indeed seems to have successfully implemented gender equality in the political sphere and the labor market to some extent.²⁴ However, with increasing immigration, the relation between women's rights and ethnic diversity has been discussed controversially. Since the 1990s, women from non-Western countries have been perceived as a challenge to models of equality in the Scandinavian welfare states: While female labor market participation in Denmark is higher than in any other country in the EU, ethnic minority women from non-Western countries have the lowest employment rate with under 40%. Male immigrants have an employment rate of 55%. The gap between the Danish population and immigrants in labor market participation is currently the highest in the EU.²⁵ In Denmark, the discourse on gender equality has increasingly been connected with the marginalization of immigrant women, their low labor market participation and the supposed "patriarchal oppression"²⁶ of (Muslim) immigrant cultures in contrast to gender equality in ethnic majority families.²⁷

2. Political and Public Discourses on Immigration

The discursive construction of cultural dichotomy between liberal Danish and oppressive immigrant or Muslim cultures is the result of a process which has its roots in the mid and late 1980s. Before 1984, Denmark viewed itself as a protector of those fleeing war or persecution – the exceptionally liberal 1983 revised Aliens Act is representative of a humanitarian approach to immigration. Until the early 1980s, Denmark had primarily experienced labor immigration. Following the high rates of

20 Cf. Goul Andersen. *Immigration and the Legitimacy of the Scandinavian Welfare States*, p. 2.

21 Cf. Christiansen. *Nordic Model of Welfare*, p. 24.

22 Cf. Nyberg. *Gender Equality Policy*, p. 69.

23 Cf. Ellingsaeter & Leira. *Gender Relations in Welfare States*, p. 30ff.

24 Cf. Christiansen. *Nordic Model of Welfare*, p. 27.

25 Cf. Siim & Stoltz. *Nationalism, Gender and Welfare*, p. 248f.

26 Ibid.

27 Cf. *ibid.*

growth and prosperity of the 1950s, the demand for employees was rising. With the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s and after female labor market participation had been enforced, Denmark attempted to attract foreign guest workers in order to extend labor capacity. In the early 1980s, the number of refugees and asylum seekers increased.²⁸ At the same time, economic pressure on the Danish welfare state was growing: High rates of expansion of social rights and redistribution of the 1950s and 1960s were followed by unemployment and an economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁹

In their 1982 party program (*Arbejdsprogram*), the Danish Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterne*) formulated a proposal concerning the treatment of issues of immigration and welfare in times of an economic crisis. The program was agreed upon as part of the party strategy at a 1980 party congress.³⁰ In their program, the Danish Social Democrats propose several strategies to ensure equality and decent living conditions for immigrants – welfare ideals of solidarity and responsibility are at the core of this model for immigration policy. The Social Democrats demand that access to educational programs and academic and political sources of knowledge should be available for every individual.³¹ A special focus is on the support of children and women: In day care institutions and schools, immigrant and Danish children should have the same chances by having access to resources and opportunities for their well-being. As the proposal explains, “special efforts should be taken to reach immigrant women.”³² Properly acquiring the Danish language and having access to the labor market is considered essential for ensuring gender equality.³³ At the same time, immigrants are meant to maintain their cultural identity and religious traditions:

The Social Democrats’ immigration policy is based on tolerance and openness. It aims at bringing Danish society the cultural and human values that immigrants can give to our culture.³⁴

The proposal by the Social Democrats reflects humanitarian and liberal views on immigration in the early 1980s. Cultural identities of immigrant groups are viewed as a benefit for the Danish society. By providing access to education and all areas of society – even to the political sphere – the Social Democrats wish to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all, which reflects basic moral and political views of the welfare state.

The 1983 Aliens Act incorporated the general vision and certain specific measures of the 1982 party program the Danish Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterne*) had formulated.³⁵ It improved the formal status of refugees and granted the right to stay in Denmark during the time the asylum application was handled.³⁶ The law is considered extremely liberal: As stated in §7, the new law grants asylum to all refugees qualifying under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Furthermore, refugees are eligible to

28 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. *National Welfare State Meets the World*, p. 109ff.

29 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. *National Welfare State Meets the World*, p. 99.

30 Cf. *Socialdemokraterne*. *Socialdemokratiets Invandrerpolitik*, p. 17.

31 Cf. *ibid.*

32 *Ibid.* original text: “Et særligt opsøgende arbejde må foretages overfor indvandrerkvinderne.”

33 Cf. *ibid.*

34 Cf. *ibid.* original text: “Socialdemokraternes invandrerpolitik bygger på tolerance og frisind. Den tilstræber, at det danske samfund tilføres de kulturelle og menneskelige værdier, som indvandrerne kan tilføre vor kultur.”

35 *Ibid.*

36 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. *National Welfare State Meets the World*, p. 113ff.

receive a residence permit because of other reasons similar to the criteria of the Geneva Convention:³⁷

After the application, a residence permit is granted to a foreigner who is to be located here in the country or at the border: [...] if for reasons similar to the Convention or because of other overriding reasons, should it not be possible for the foreigner to return to his home country.³⁸

The law also specifies the right of family reunification: In §9, the Aliens Act lays out three cases in which a residence permit is issued to a foreigner: Under the second paragraph, a foreigner “who lives with a Danish resident for a longer period as part of a marriage or a solid relationship”³⁹ has the right to reside in Denmark. Also, the law grants a residence permit to “underaged children of a Danish resident or his or her spouse should the child live with the custody holder.”⁴⁰

As already outlined by the Social Democrats in 1982, under §22, §23, §24 and §25 of the new Aliens Act, deportation is only considered possible in case an individual committed a criminal offence and received a prison sentence. The longer an individual has stayed in Denmark and obtained a residence permit, the longer a prison sentence must be in order to qualify for deportation. Moreover, deportation is viewed as a particular burden when certain criteria are met – personal health, familial closeness to Danish individuals or others or a personal “affiliation with the country”⁴¹ for instance when “the alien has come [to Denmark] as a child or very young and thus has been fully or in part brought up in this country.”⁴²

The Aliens Act was publicly well received. Especially its humanitarian aspects resonated with the Danish society.⁴³ However, within a year after the implementation of the law, the number of asylum seekers coming to Denmark was multiplying. The number of so-called spontaneous refugees fleeing acute conflicts, war and persecution increased from only a few hundred in 1983 to several thousands in 1984.⁴⁴ After 1984, a pivotal shift occurred when media discourses and political actors framed the incoming refugees as a source of financial crisis and chaos. Refugees were increasingly referred to as risks to the stability of the Danish welfare system. This beginning of a political and public *crisis awareness* around immigrants and refugees added immigration on the political agenda.

In the subsequent years, the discourse became increasingly complex and politicized.⁴⁵ This process of politicization can be assessed by considering newspaper articles published in the largest Danish national newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, the tabloid paper *Ekstra Bladet* and the center-left newspaper

37 Cf. Folketinget. Forslag til Udlændingelov. No. L 105, p. 608.

38 Ibid. original text: “Efter ansøgning gives der opholdstilladelse til en udlænding, som befinder sig her i landet eller på grænsen, hvis det af lignende grunde som anført i konventionen eller af andre tungtvejende grunde ikke bør kræves, at udlændingen vender tilbage til sit hjemland.”

39 Ibid. p. 611, original text: “[...] som samlever på fælles bopæl i ægteskab eller i fast samlivsforhold af længere varighed med en i Danmark fastboende person.”

40 Ibid. original text: “Mindreårigt barn af en i Danmark fastboende person eller dennes ægtefælle, når barnet bor hos forældremyndighedens indehaver.”

41 Ibid. p. 615, original text: “udlændingens tilknytning til landet”.

42 Ibid. original text: “[...] udlændingen er kommet hertil som barn eller ganske ung og dermed helt eller delvis har haft sin opvækst her i landet.”

43 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 70.

44 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. *National Welfare State Meets the World*, p. 115.

45 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 87f.

Politiken in the mid-1980s. Newspapers in Denmark have historically been linked to the Danish political parties and retain certain ideological profiles while aiming at impartial news coverage in general.⁴⁶

In the midst of the debate in autumn 1986, *Jyllands-Posten* published two ads by Danish priest and columnist of the newspaper, Søren Krarup. As Yilmaz emphasizes, Krarup's intervention occurred at a time when the political parties were under immense pressure: Finding a balance between humanitarian responsibilities and an increasingly popular "moral panic"⁴⁷ around refugee issues especially challenged the Social Democrats. In his ads, Krarup exploited this fragile situation and aimed at turning the debate into a crisis of representation for the political authorities.⁴⁸ In his many articles and a series of advertisements published in *Jyllands-Posten*, he projects that *mass immigration* might cause Denmark to lose its specific characteristics and prevents Danes from being themselves in "naturalness and peace"⁴⁹.

Krarup clearly uses arguments based on culture, cultural difference, and religion. He asks: "Is Copenhagen going to be a Danish city in 50 years? Can Danes continue to be a people when there is no longer a shared language, history or religion?"⁵⁰ Krarup's narrative is representative of the beginning of a turn in the immigration discourse which would center around cultural *otherness* in the 1990s and 2000s. He promotes the concept of Denmark as a culturally homogenous society with a common language and religion. Following his campaign in *Jyllands-Posten*, Søren Krarup founded an anti-immigration organization called The Danish Association (*Den Danske Forening*) which gained political importance during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Rydgren points out, the organization aimed at preserving the concept of the homogenous Danish nation and opposed immigration from non-Western countries. The Danish Association is considered a pivotal actor in the politicization of the immigration issue in the 1990s and had great influence on the founding of the Danish People's Party in 1995.⁵¹

In the mid- and late-1980s, right-wing actors like Søren Krarup used alleged cultural differences as arguments to facilitate anti-immigration sentiments. At the same time, Social Democratic politicians increasingly voiced their concern that the financial, social, and cultural burden of refugees and immigrants on the municipalities was intolerable. The Aliens Act had assigned the responsibility for accommodating refugees and bearing the costs to the Danish municipalities. The controversial debate on the capacity of Danish municipalities to take up refugees finally led to amendments to the Aliens Acts in May 1985. In a modification of the law, the procedure of reviewing applications for asylum was simplified, access to entry could be denied faster and without the right to an appeal process. Even though the popular demands for a tightening of the Aliens Act had been fulfilled, the

46 Cf. Blach-Ørsten. *News Regime in Denmark*, p. 95.

47 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 100.

48 Cf. *ibid.* p. 100f.

49 Krarup. "Nej, ikke en kroner!". *Jyllands-Posten* (Sept. 21, 1986), p. 7, original text: "naturligehd og fred".

50 *Ibid.* original text: "Er København en dansk by i 50 år? Kan danskere fortsætte med at være et folk, når sprog, historie eller religion ikke længere er et fælles?".

51 Cf. Rydgren. *Explaining the Emergence of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties*, p. 481.

debate remained controversial and fearful of an *uncontrollable flow* of refugees seeking asylum in Denmark and a possible *shutdown* of the Danish borders.⁵²

In August 1987, local Social Democratic mayor Per Madsen of the municipality Ishøj gave an interview in the Danish tabloid paper *Ekstra Bladet* criticizing Danish immigration policy and the new responsibility of the municipalities. Madsen's interview also reflects the shift in the narrative on immigration and refugees: The debate was beginning to emphasize religion and Islam in a distinctive narrative of difference. Refugees and immigrants were not only perceived as a financial burden to municipalities and the state, their religion and cultural practices now entered the discourse as the main challenge to the prevalence of Danish societal values and the welfare state system.

Per Madsen was the mayor of Ishøj, a working-class city south of Copenhagen with a high quota of immigrants and refugees.⁵³ In the article, Madsen criticizes Denmark's liberal refugee and immigration policy and refers to problems with integration and cultural differences – especially with regard to gender hierarchies:

The orthodox Muslims have become more visible publicly, and it is a pure shame as regards the women in particular. They are kept [...] in medieval conditions and do not participate on the labor market at all, partly because they cannot speak Danish, and partly because they are not allowed to get an education.⁵⁴

Per Madsen's critique of the liberal Danish immigration policy was concerned with aspects of religious or social otherness. In this interview and several other articles, Madsen suggests that cultural differences – negative work ethic, lack of language skills, specific marriage practices and gender hierarchies – are central to a problematic lack of integration of immigrants and refugees.⁵⁵

As Yilmaz argues, Per Madsen's accounts reflect the narrative and content of the debate Søren Krarup had started. The debates of the mid- and late-1980s had created a sense of crisis and fear by putting immigrants' culture on the discursive map. This culture was mainly associated with specific traditional religious practices of Islam.⁵⁶ The shift in the discourse towards a cultural divide or, as Yilmaz states, an "unbridgeable frontier between Muslims and the Danish people"⁵⁷ was central to the late 1990s.⁵⁸ Krarup's cultural framings as well as his theory of an antagonism between political elites and the *ordinary Danish people* were even voiced by local Social Democratic politicians such as Per Madsen. A debate that, in the beginning circled around refugees had turned into a more general account of immigrants as possible threats to the well-functioning system of Danish welfare and society. Instead of emphasizing *rights*, the discourse on immigration and refugees was now one circling around *duties*. While there is no coherent discourse on culture and religion yet, specifically Islam, the development, and debates since 1984 reflect new inconsistencies in the self-image

52 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 87.

53 Cf. *ibid.* p. 126.

54 Cf. Just. "Ishøj splitt: Mohammed eller Madsen". *Ekstra Bladet* (Aug. 11, 1987), p. 1, original text: "De ortodokse muhammedanere er blevet mere synlige i gadebillede, og med kvinderne især er det en ren jammer. De bliver holdt under tøflen i middelalderlige tilstande og kommer slet ikke ud på arbejdsmarkedet, dels fordi de ikke kan dansk, dels fordi de ikke får lov til at få en uddannelse."

55 Cf. *ibid.*

56 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 126ff.

57 *Ibid.* p. 134.

58 Cf. *ibid.*

Denmark employed before. While leftist politicians, media, authors, or intellectuals protected liberal Denmark and its 1983 Aliens Act, critical and anti-refugee as well as anti-immigrant voices started gaining power – even among Social Democrats.⁵⁹

After Per Madsen’s interview Danish tabloid paper *Ekstra Bladet* shortly before the 1987 national election, Social Democratic leader Anker Jørgensen – initiator of the liberal 1983 Aliens Act – told *Jyllands-Posten*: “Denmark is a small country and must not be overrun by foreigners. Too many refugees will damage Denmark economically and culturally.”⁶⁰ With this statement, Jørgensen deviated from a consensual agreement among the governing parties who had agreed not to use immigration and refugees as an issue for campaigning in the 1987 election. Jørgensen had, however, not only broken the political consensus, his statement also shows that by 1987, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments were manifested in political and public discourses. Even though the political landscape did not change radically in the 1987 election and the Social Democrats were able to maintain most of their voters, new anti-immigrant narratives had been permanently established in the political and public sphere.⁶¹

The politicization of the immigration issue was pushed by the founding of the right-wing Danish People’s Party in the 1990s. The party gained tremendously in political influence and electoral support in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since the late 1980s, a far-right circle of intellectuals, among them Søren Krarup, had built the ideological and strategic foundation for the Danish People’s Party with The Danish Association (Den Danske Forening).⁶² In their program, adopted at The Danish Association’s national meeting in 1993, the organization formulated their anti-immigration agenda entitled “A Realistic Immigration Policy - Problem Description and Suggestions for Solutions”. The narrative is clearly highlighting far-right visions of a homogeneous society free of immigration from non-Western countries. Immigrants and refugees are referred to as a coherent – and mostly Muslim – group interrupting societal peace. Immigrant cultures are presented as incompatible with Danish norms and gender equality:⁶³

Denmark has so far been a homogeneous society with common culture and values. With the arrival of completely foreign cultures, many of which even contain characteristics that are quite incompatible with Danish norms of life (see, for example, the Muslims' view of women), stability in Danish society will be lost.⁶⁴

According to the Danish Association, closing “cultural gaps”⁶⁵ between liberal Western and oppressive non-Western norms has not worked in any other European country as sharing key principles, such as equality between the sexes, is the pivotal element of a properly functioning

59 Ibid.

60 Hansen & Kesby. “S lægger op til stramning af flygtninge politiken”. *Jyllands-Posten* (Sept. 6, 1987), p. 8, original text: “Danmark er et lille land og må ikke blive overrendt t af udlændinge. Alt for mange flygtninge vil skade Danmark økonomisk og kulturelt.”

61 Cf. Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 129f.

62 Cf. Rydgren. *Explaining the Emergence of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties*, p. 481.

63 Cf. Den Danske Forening. Program.

64 Cf. *ibid*, original text: “Danmark har hidtil været et homogent samfund med fælles kultur og værdinormer. I takt med tilførelsen af helt fremmedartede kulturer, hvoraf mange endog rummer træk, der er ganske uforenelige med danske levnormer (jf. f.eks. muslimernes kvindesyn) vil stabiliteten i det danske samfund gå tabt.”

65 Cf. Den Danske Forening. Program, original text: “kulturkløfter”.

society. The Danish Association also contrasts low birth rates of Danish women with high birthrates of immigrant women to illustrate that “Denmark will be dominated by immigrants within a short period of time.”⁶⁶ The Danish Association argues that “the fundamental principle is that nobody has the right to force one’s way into another country at the expense of the population in that country.”⁶⁷ The human rights of those living in a country should, according to the program, never be set aside for the rights of others. The Danish Association only allows granted citizenship to those who are fully *assimilated*. Similarly, the financial burden of immigration should not be put on the Danish population: “Taxpayers are not investors in foreigners’ maintenance of their own cultural practices. Foreigners who want to cultivate the culture of their home country must do so at their own expense.”⁶⁸

While the Danish People’s Party was promoting radical ethno-nationalism, the government’s general perspective on immigrants and refugees in the 1990s was the paradigm of *integration through work*.⁶⁹ When the Social Democratic government took office again in 1993, the creation of a coherent integration law and the introduction of immigrants to the labor market were the most salient political issues. Immigrant women were perceived as a specific challenge to the Danish welfare state as many were dependent on social benefits due to their limited options as women within their ethnic communities. This was especially relevant to foreign women who were considered at risk of isolation and unemployment as a result of gender norms in non-Western (mainly Muslim) societies. In 1998, a governmental report which primarily deals with labor market integration of female immigrants and refugees was issued. The report elaborated on the work done by the so-called Barrier Committee which had been set up in 1997 in order to find solutions to questions of integration of immigrants and refugees into the Danish society.⁷⁰ As the report states, the Barrier Committee recommended that a needs-oriented and regionalized labor market activation-system needed to be implemented so that marginalized unemployed immigrant and refugee groups could profit from better opportunities. The Barrier Committee accordingly aims at “dismantling barriers”⁷¹ and reducing ethnic discrimination on the labor market.⁷²

The 1998 report on immigrant and refugee women on the labor investigates specific *barriers* for immigrant women. The report lists several factors leading to a low labor market participation of immigrant women: Apart from deficiencies in knowledge of the Danish language, insufficient guidance by the Danish authorities and the high unemployment rate in Denmark in general, the report also refers to “cultural barriers”⁷³, different dress codes, lack of knowledge of social practices, and organizational cultures in Danish workplaces. Also, specific demands and perceptions of the woman’s role in society by her immediate environment are considered relevant factors. The report

66 Ibid. original text: “Danmark vil inden for et i historisk perspektiv meget kort tidsrum blive domineret af indvandrere.”

67 Ibid. original text: “Grundlæggende har intet menneske ret til at trænge sig ind i et andet land på bekostning af dettes egen befolkning.”

68 Ibid. original text: “Der investeres ikke skatteydermidler i fremmedes opretholdelse af deres egne kulturtræk. Fremmede, som ønsker at dyrke deres hjemlige kultur her, må gøre det for egen regning.”

69 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. National Welfare State Meets the World, p. 127.

70 Cf. *ibid.*

71 Indenrigsministeriet. Report No. 1359, p. 180, original text: “nedbrydning af barriererne”.

72 Cf. *ibid.* p. 185.

73 Ibid. original text: “kulturelle barrierer”.

states that while the unemployment rate of foreign women is generally high, wives or partners of guest workers – who came to Denmark before 1973 as part of a family-reunification – are considered particularly marginalized.⁷⁴ An important structural barrier in these cases is that in these cases “the purpose of family reunification Denmark was that they should be housewives until the family would return to their home country.”⁷⁵ The emergence of new technologies has further reduced the chances for unskilled women on the labor market.⁷⁶ In addition to these structural disadvantages, the committee emphasizes formal barriers keeping immigrant and refugee women from succeeding in work environments. Language barriers and lack of educational qualifications are considered especially decisive. In the view of the committee, reasons for educational deficiencies of immigrant and refugee women are to be found in some immigrant cultures. In contrast to ethnic minority men, women are simply considered less educated:

In the committee's view, there are grounds for believing that some ethnic minority women have – due to their cultural background, the tradition in their home countries, social affiliations, etc. – a lower educational background than ethnic minority men.⁷⁷

As the committee states, some minority women do not attempt to enter the labor market because of specific gender roles attributing men to the public and women to the private sphere. This informal barrier keeps women from interacting with other people outside their home, acquiring the Danish language and the country's “social norms [and] cultural beliefs”⁷⁸. Moreover, the committee refers to possible prejudices and assumptions by employers or colleagues about the cultural background of immigrant and refugee women – for example about the possibility of “multiple births and thus an unstable work performance, assumptions about different social norms [...], social manners etc.”⁷⁹

For the committee, there is reason to believe that many ethnic minority women are often isolated from society because of the specific gender roles. Thus, they are more likely to struggle with social interactions or acquiring the Danish language.⁸⁰

In the 1990s the integration logic emerging in Denmark was clearly based on the emphasis of duties. Introducing foreigners to the labor market and thus expecting them to participate in supporting the welfare state system, reflects that Denmark was clearly experiencing a retreat from multiculturalist perspectives. This shift is reflected in the Integration Act of 1998. With this new law, the Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen was aiming at creating a cohesive legal basis for the integration of refugees and immigrants as the issue had been top of the political agenda since the founding of the Danish People's Party in 1995.⁸¹ The main goal of the Integration Act was to introduce foreigners to

74 Cf. *ibid.*

75 *Ibid.* p. 188, original text: “[...] formålet med familiesammenføringen til Danmark i mange tilfælde var, at de skulle være hjemmegående husmødre, indtil familien kunne vende tilbage til hjemlande.”

76 *Ibid.* p. 187f.

77 *Ibid.* p. 192, original text: “Efter udvalgets opfattelse er der grund til at antage, at nogle etniske minoritetskvinder, som følge af deres kulturelle baggrund, traditionen i deres hjemlande, sociale tilhørsforhold m.v., har en ringere skolemæssig baggrund end tilsvarende etniske minoritetsmænd.”

78 Indenrigsministeriet. Report No. 1359, p. 191, original text: “sociale normer, kulturforståelse”.

79 *Ibid.* original text: “[...] mange børnefødsler, og den deraf følgende ustabile arbejdsindsats, forestillinger om forskelle i sociale normer [...] sociale omgangsformer m.v.”

80 Cf. *ibid.* p. 190ff.

81 Cf. *ibid.*

the labor market. The paradigm of rights and duties was once again highlighted: Participation in introduction programs and labor activation programs was mandatory. §31 of the Integration Act specified that if foreigners did not fulfil their duties, monetary support could be reduced. While the Integration Bill did not regulate immigration or entry to the country, it inflicted control over immigrant's lives after they arrived. The Social Democrats wanted to emphasize integration of immigrants and refugees; thus, the party did not urge stricter rules for family unification. Petersen and Jønsson argue that the law did not satisfy the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the right-wing parties in Parliament as their prerogative was to regulate access to the country in general.⁸²

However, the controversial political discourse on immigration and refugees did not fall silent with the Integration Act of 1998. In the late 1990s, the Social Democrats were increasingly referring to anti-immigration narratives. In the subsequent years, cultural attributes of immigrants and refugees – now viewed as a coherent group of aliens (fremmede) – were used to create a narrative of otherness.

The victimization of Muslim women was a central tool in using gendered discourses to facilitate anti-immigration sentiments. In the late 1990s, political and media debates mainly dealt with immigrant women by viewing them as a particularly marginalized group facing specific difficulties to integrate themselves into the Danish society due to a lack of education, language skills or access to the labor market. The early 2000s saw a broadening of the debate and an increase in the reference of Muslim women as the personification of the dichotomy between liberal Danish gender norms and oppressive immigrant or Muslim cultures. Siim and Andreassen argue that both veiling of Muslim women and forced marriages became a salient part of the increasingly gendered discourse.⁸³ In the discourse of the early 2000s, both terms were used synonymously to exemplify how young Muslim women were forced into marriage by their Muslim immigrant families. At the beginning of the new millennium, the discourse on immigration and refugees had become one of the most salient issues on the political agenda: The Muslim immigrant was the key to this “social imaginary”⁸⁴ of the oppressive and patriarchal system of Islam.⁸⁵

This is reflected in Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's New Year's speech of 2000. While Rasmussen acknowledges in his speech that there are foreigners contributing to the Danish society, he states that “there are, however, also groups that make it clear that they do not want to be part of society at all.”⁸⁶ To Rasmussen, it is evident that these immigrant groups do not care about Danish “fundamental values”⁸⁷. Clearly, gender equality is among these values when Rasmussen refers to forced and arranged marriages as an example of cultural difference which is incompatible with Danish egalitarian principles:

It is not acceptable that a well-educated young Turkish woman in Denmark is in effect forced into marriage with a man from a remote Turkish village. To us it is a human right like any other that both the

82 Cf. Petersen & Jønsson. *National Welfare State Meets the World*, p. 130.

83 Cf. Siim & Andreassen. *Values, Equality and Differences in Liberal Democracies*, p. 43.

84 Yilmaz. *Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation*, p. 168.

85 Cf. *ibid.*

86 Statsministeriet. *Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen New Year's Speech 2000*, p. 3.

87 *Ibid.*

man and the woman are free to choose a partner. There are too many examples of virtually automatic family reunifications that have turned out to be prearranged and forced.⁸⁸

Rasmussen uses forced marriages as the key example when referring to cultural differences and the unwillingness of some – clearly Muslim – immigrants to assimilate into the equality-based Danish society. He thus proposes “ensur[ing] a coherent fabric of the Danish society”⁸⁹ by imposing three central requirements for immigrants: Acquisition of the Danish language, participation in the labor market and having access to education and acceptance of the “values upon which the Danish society is built.”⁹⁰ According to Rasmussen, these values are based on a modern understanding of a state system in which everyone knows the specific rights and duties necessary to hold up a universalist system. In this system, the “ideals of equality and community must include all and be respected by all.”⁹¹ The national narrative is, according to Rasmussen, clearly one of cohesion and assimilation. Gender equality is embedded in this narrative and highlighted as an example of the progressiveness of the universalist Danish welfare state. Rasmussen argues that integration is a lengthy and difficult process that primarily takes place in people’s everyday lives – not just on the political level. He proposes that instead of political rhetoric, concrete solutions are needed. Therefore a “revision of the provisions of the Immigration Act concerning the reunion of families”⁹² should be introduced. Secondly, he proposes that the cooperation between the government and municipalities needs to be strengthened in order to ensure proper integration of immigrants and refugees. Abuse of the welfare system will not be tolerated as the “government has intervened and struck against abuse several times.”⁹³ He further wants the government to increase its efforts in bringing forward cohesive policy on integration.⁹⁴

The framing of a cultural antagonism between liberal Danish gender roles and oppressive Muslim values is also reflected in the discourse on veiling in 2000 and 2001. These early debates on Muslim body covering primarily centered on the *hijab*, which is a form of head scarf covering the woman’s hair and shoulders. It is still the most common form of Muslim headwear in Denmark.⁹⁵ In 2001, the Islamic head scarf stirred controversy in a media setting. Feminist activists and organizations voiced their concern that veiling was a symbol of a systematic oppression of Muslim women. The first extensive debate on Muslim veiling was initiated by journalist Helle Marete Brix in her 2001 article “Hello...Where Are You Feminists?” published in the Danish national center-left newspaper *Politiken*.⁹⁶

Brix argued that veiling can generally be considered a sign of female oppression in Muslim or Arab cultures. She calls for a critical discourse within the Danish feminist and women’s movement on

88 Ibid.

89 Statsministeriet. Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen New Year's Speech 2000, p. 3.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Cf. *ibid.*

95 Cf. Andreassen. *Take off that Veil*, p. 216.

96 Cf. Andreassen. *Political Women in the News Media*, p. 64.

veiling and argues that feminists have neglected and ignored the oppression of Muslim women for a long time:

It is embarrassing that the Danish women’s movement remains completely silent about the fact that many female citizens in our country are living under oppressive patriarchal values from seventh-century Arab countries.⁹⁷

Brix does only characterize veiling as oppressive, but she also adopts the narrative frame of medieval and primitive Muslim societal and gender norms. Arguing that these norms contradict liberal Danish values, she views it a responsibility of Danish feminists to intervene and expose the injustice which Muslim women face.

Soon after the article’s publication in Politiken, the debate was picked up by Jyllands-Posten and journalist Pernille Ammitzbøll. In her article “You’re Sleeping, Sister”, Ammitzbøll refers to several Danish feminists she interviewed on behalf of the women’s movement that had neglected the structural oppression of immigrant Muslim women, as Brix argues. A brief teaser on the front page of the relevant Jyllands-Posten issue lays out the main conflict Danish feminism faces as regards immigrant women and veiling. According to Karen Hallberg, a representative of the Danish Women’s Society, her organization has not been “persistent enough when [they] tried to get in contact with immigrant women. [They] should have expressed [themselves] better, but [they] were afraid to be declared racists.”⁹⁸ The introductory paragraph of the article further emphasizes the criticism by asking purely rhetorically: “Who fights for the veiled immigrant women who find themselves [...] oppressed and in a forced marriage? The Danish women's movement is silent.”⁹⁹

The head scarf can thus merely be considered a symbol of the discursive construction of cultural dichotomy – gender equality is a central category for the national narrative of the universal welfare state, a society based on social trust and common values. It is of particular relevance that the debate was initiated by women representing the feminist movement. As Yilmaz states, these themes are employed as tools to enforce the antagonism between Danish and immigrant Muslim cultures – not only in right-wing political contexts but also in center-left political spheres. These new alliances across the political spectrum have, as Yilmaz points out, resulted in a new focus on culturally coded signs, e.g. the head scarf, forced marriages, by emphasizing core values in Denmark such as gender equality.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the voices of these women remained unheard in the debate.

97 Brix. “Uhuu...hvorn er I henne, feminister?” Politiken. (May 26, 2001), p. 6, original text: “Det er pinligt, at den danske kvindebevægelse forholder sig fuldstændigt tavst til det faktum, at mange kvindelige medborgere i landet er underlagt undertrykkende patriarkalske normer fra det 7. århundredes Arabien.”

98 Ammitzbøll. “Kritik af kvindebevægelsen” Jyllands-Posten (June 24, 2001), p.1, original text: “Vi har ikke været vedholdende nok, når vi forsøgte at skabe kontakt til indvandrerkvinderne. Vi burde nok også have markeret os noget bedre, men vi har været bange for at blive erklæret for at være racister.”

99 Ibid. original text: “Hvem kæmper for de forstummede indvandrerkvinder, som må finde sig [...] undertrykkelse og i tvangsægteskaber? Den danske kvindebevægelse er tavs.”

100 Cf. Yilmaz. Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation, p. 168.

3. Ethnonationalism in Right-Wing and Mainstream Politics and Media

Two reasons can be identified to explain the culturalization of immigration debates and the salience of gendered discourses: Firstly, the political impact of right-wing political actors is a salient factor in the Danish case. While the influence of right-wing intellectuals like Søren Krarup who were working on the ideological foundations of the Danish People's Party started growing in the late 1980s, the salience of immigration issues on the political agenda increased with the foundation of the Danish People's Party. It was the Danish People's Party that established cultural and religious narratives politically.

However, the analysis of the gendered discourse since 1984 also confirms the findings of research by Goul-Andersen. The political impact of anti-immigration parties is one reason why immigration became such a salient issue in Denmark. Nonetheless, mainstream liberal and conservative minority governments in Denmark have also helped to politicize the issue.¹⁰¹ Since the 2001 election, the Liberal Party underwent a rightwards political shift and became part of a minority government which needed the support of the Danish People's Party. From 2016 to 2019, the Liberal Party has again been in office and is highly reliant on the right-wing populists. The Danish Folketinget has since then introduced radical new restrictions on immigration and highly controversial integration policies as the ban of veiling.

The Danish Social Democrats also changed their immigration course which is now increasingly right-wing: In the late 1980s, the party was still divided on the immigration issue. Over time, local Social Democratic mayors demanded a new anti-immigration party line and pressured the party leadership trying to prevent politicization. Still, throughout the 1990s, the Social Democratic government introduced restrictive amendments to the Aliens Act and introduced the 1998 Integration Act. Since the 2001 election, the party continually experiences a rightward shift.

In 2019, the Social Democrats claimed victory in national elections after they had continuously lost voters to conservative and right-wing parties since the turn of the century. While the party put forward progressive left-wing policy ideas when it comes to fighting the climate crisis, raising taxes for high-income earners and investing in childcare institutions and teachers, the party put forward a rather radical and non-liberal policy on immigration. The policy paper "Just and Realistic. An Immigration Policy Which Brings Denmark Together" extensively covers different areas of immigration policy. As outlined in the policy paper, the party aims at reducing the number of immigrants coming to Denmark, investing in reception centers outside Europe and helping refugees internationally and pushing for integration of non-Western immigrants who already stay in Denmark. The plan clearly reflects the concern that immigration challenges the Danish universal welfare state.¹⁰² Especially women from non-Western countries are viewed as a burden to Danish welfare. Thus, the Social Democrats argue that immigrants should be required to work 37 hours per week when receiving benefits:

101 Cf. Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup. *Immigration as a Political Issue*, p. 632ff.

102 Cf. Nedergaard. *Back to its Roots*, p. 2ff.

The Danish labor market culture, where both men and women work, differs from the culture of many other countries where the women's place is traditionally in the home. [...] The best way to become a part of the Danish society is by having a job [...] Therefore, the Social Democrats want the mandatory introduction of the 37-hour work week for all immigrants receiving integration benefits or cash benefits.¹⁰³

Contributing through work and living according to what is considered “values that matter in Denmark”¹⁰⁴ is at the core of the policy plan: “Danish freedom and gender equality must apply to everyone in Denmark. More must become part of the Danish community.”¹⁰⁵

4. Conclusion: Social Cohesion, Gender, and the Welfare State

The universal welfare state system is one which aims at equality for all. Gender equality is a central element in the national Danish narrative of the universal welfare state. In Denmark, the model of welfare is based on the principles of social trust, universalism and equality as a base for the stability of the welfare system.

While this is a strength and advantage for some, the Danish society functions as an exclusionary, norm based and tight social network. A powerful narrative of the Nordic welfare state in Denmark is the view that its roots lie in the conception of an “ethnically and culturally homogenous welfare state”¹⁰⁶. When facing globalization, increased mobility and immigration, the Nordic welfare states and their conceptions of citizenship were pressured.¹⁰⁷ Since the 1990s and 2000s, Denmark has continuously emphasized national cohesion and belonging as important factors in maintaining the Nordic model of welfare and opposed accommodating multiculturalism and heterogeneity.¹⁰⁸ Outsiders who seemingly do not adhere to the common norm base – such as gender equality – are perceived as destructive elements to the system. The Danish model of welfare is, as it emphasizes universalism, primarily based on mutual social trust and a homogeneous norm base.¹⁰⁹

The paradigm of cultural homogeneity is a precondition for the functioning Danish welfare system which is reflected in gendered immigration discourses since the mid-1980s. The shifts and developments in the Danish discourse and legislation on immigration are representative of what has been labeled *welfare nationalism*. Since the 1980s, Denmark has experienced continuous distancing from the concept of multiculturalism. New immigration policies introduced in Denmark in recent years reflect a break with the universalist principle of welfare politics. While the welfare state system

103 Socialdemokraterne. Retfærdig og realistisk, p. 13, original text: “Den danske arbejdsmarkedskultur, hvor både mænd og kvinder er i arbejde, adskiller sig fra kulturen i mange andre lande, hvor kvindernes arbejde traditionelt er i hjemmet.[...] Den bedste måde at blive integreret i det danske samfund er ved at have et arbejde. [...] Derfor vil Socialdemokratiet indføre en pligt til at bidrage i 37 timer om ugen for alle indvandrere på integrationsydelse og kontanthjælp.”

104 Ibid. original text: “værdier, der gælder i Danmark.”

105 Ibid. p. 4, original text: “Den danske frihed og ligestilling mellem kønnene skal gælde alle i Danmark. Flere skal blive en del af det danske fællesskab.”

106 Brandal, Bratberg & Thorsen. The Nordic Model, p. 160.

107 Cf. Midtbøen. Citizenship, Integration and the Quest for Social Cohesion, p. 1.

108 Siim. Gender, Diversity and Migration, p. 621.

109 Cf. Forsander. Social Capital in the Context of Immigration, p. 210.

has indeed been very successful in diminishing inequalities with regards to social class and has facilitated progress and prosperity in Denmark and the other Nordic countries, as the analysis of public and political debates illustrated, the Danish national identity is embedded in a narrative of universal values of gender equality as part of the welfare state system. In this narrative of dichotomy, immigrants and Muslim cultural norms were framed as patriarchal and incompatible with the Danish liberal society. The discursive (re-)production of these narratives is symptomatic of a Danish national identity based on exclusive solidarity.

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