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Political and Democratic Participation of Migrant Women in Denmark

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Introduction

A significant number of migrant women reside in Denmark. This paper summarises various barriers faced by migrant women in terms of participating in political and democratic life in Denmark. It also stresses the need to overcome such barriers and provides suggestions as to how this can be achieved.

The term 'democratic life' describes the ability of an individual to interact with governmental and non-governmental democratic procedures. A democratic society is one in which all individuals can participate and are engaged in the decision-making procedures, as well as in community and social life, for example through participating in non-governmental associations.

In particular, participation in political and democratic life refers to having the right to vote, stand as candidates, join political parties, and having the right, opportunity, and space to influence public decision-making procedures that contribute to the development of a society.

For this paper, KULU-Women and Development (KULU), the lead association authoring this paper, also conducted survey interviews with experts, migrant women, and decision-makers in Denmark.¹

¹ The survey was sent to 13 decision-makers (12 women with migrant background and 1 man), representing 7 political parties. The group comprised members of the Danish Parliament as well as members of 5 city councils. 4 decision makers answered representing 3 political parties. The group comprised 1 member of the Danish Parliament and 3 city council members representing 3 municipalities, including 2 municipalities with large migrant populations. It was also sent to 7 experts (5 researchers and students at the Danish Institute for International Studies and Copenhagen University, 1 former politician with migrant background and experience on migrants in politics, and 1 head of integration institution for migrant and refugee women, *Integrationshuset Kringlebakken*). 3 experts answered (2 researchers and 1 head of the integration institution). In addition, 8 migrant women also responded to the survey – they were born in the Philippines, India, Ghana, Russia and Lithuania. The respondents had been living in Denmark from 1 to more than 20 years.

Executive Summary

- As of 2021, 300,000 migrant women resided in Denmark
- Migrant women in Denmark continue to face issues such as barriers to political participation, discrimination, complicated paths to citizenship, insufficient media representation, and insufficient political representation. Measures to better support migrant women need to be taken such as: education and reform surrounding the obtaining of Danish citizenship, increased grassroots engagement, more positive media coverage, advocacy of migrant women in political positions, support for migrant women's organisations, education against discrimination, and affirmative action.

I. Migrant Women in Denmark

A migrant refers to an individual who resides within the country in question for a minimum of 12 months. A third-country national in terms of the EU refers to an individual who is not an EU citizen and thus, does not have access to the EU right to free movement per Article 2(5) of the Schengen Borders Code. An asylum seeker is defined as an individual who is a third-country national or who is stateless and who, via the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol, has applied for protection with a decision still pending (European Commission, 2022). Once this application is approved, the individual is granted refugee status.

In 2021, roughly 5.8 million people lived in Denmark, of whom over 2.5 million were women of Danish origin. This same year **300,000 migrant women reportedly resided in Denmark, of whom 80,000 had Danish citizenship**. Regardless of the large percentage of migrants in Denmark, voting rights remain a democratic issue, in that while they can vote in local elections, migrants without a Danish passport cannot vote in general elections.²

Table 1: Female population in Denmark³

Year	Ancestry	Citizenship	
		Denmark	Foreign
2021	Person of Danish origin	2 524 001	2 695
2021	Immigrants	80 278	230 833
2021	Descendants [*]	63 778	336 603

^{*}Descendants of migrants are born in Denmark, but the parents were not born in Denmark nor did they have Danish citizenship

In the last five years, **most migrant women have migrated from Romania, Poland and Germany**. In 2022, Denmark gave asylum to many refugees from Ukraine. In addition, statistics show that many migrants came from the USA, India, Philippines, and China.⁴ Migrants in Denmark usually stay in big cities, specifically Copenhagen. Statistics from February 2022 show that Polish immigrants are the largest group in Denmark, at around 44,000. Syrian and Romanian immigrants follow closely with 35,000 and 34,000 respectively.

² Statistics Denmark, 2022. Figures show number of migrants including all genders.

³ Ibid. Statistics refer to immigrant women.

⁴ Statistics Denmark, 07.09.2022, <https://www.statbank.dk/>

As of January 2022, the following groups were also a large part of the Danish population: Turks (33,500), Germans (32,500), Iraqis (22,000), and Iranians (18,000) (Statista Research Department, 2023).

With regard to **Denmark's legislative framework**, in 1999 Denmark launched the Integration Act intended to help integrate migrants at the municipal level (European Commission, 2023). Since then, immigration policies and packages have focused on integrating migrants into the labour force (European Commission, 2023). Current migrant integration is based around an integration policy introduced in 2015, focusing on jobs, including aspects such as language requirements and civic education.⁵ Such policies are overseen by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, however municipalities oversee a large portion of integration projects (European Commission, 2023).

Migration to Denmark is instigated for various reasons. One important reason is employment, as Denmark offers the following residence permits for individuals employed by Danish companies: Denmark Positive List, Pay Limit Scheme, Green Card Scheme or Corporate Scheme (Make Visas, n.d.). Furthermore, a young foreign national wishing to learn the Danish language and culture can also apply for a residence permit as an au pair (The Danish Immigration Service, n.d.-b). Individuals may also migrate to access education, as Denmark offers study permits for individuals enrolled in eligible institutions (The Danish Immigration Service, n.d.-b). A third major reason is family reunification, where foreign nationals may move to Denmark to reunite with a family member who studies, works or has permanent residence in Denmark (The Danish Immigration Service, n.d.-b). Migrants who wish to stay in Denmark for longer periods of time have various visa or residence permit options. Below are some migrant categories relevant in the context of Denmark: EEA/EU, Nordic citizens

Citizens from EEA/EU countries can live, work or study legally in Denmark through an easy residence permit application process or via family reunification. After living in Denmark for five years, they can apply for permanent residency. Nordic citizens and their family members from Finland, Iceland, Norway or Sweden do not require a residence permit.⁶ EU citizens who migrate to Denmark typically do so for the job market, higher wages, better working conditions, cheaper housing, and education.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ New to Denmark, official website, <https://nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/You-want-to-apply/Residence-as-a-Nordic-citizen-or-EU-or-EEA-citizen>

⁷ OECD Report, STATUS FOR DECEMBER, 2021

Asylum seekers

Anyone from a foreign country may apply for asylum in Denmark. With the objective of temporarily relocating to Denmark, asylum seekers can be issued time-limited residence visas. When their need for protection ends, their right to reside in Denmark expires (The Danish Immigration Service, n.d.-b). A law providing temporary status for those fleeing indiscriminate violence, as opposed to personal persecution, was passed in Denmark in 2015. This rule was ultimately applied to about 4,700 of the roughly 35,000 Syrians living in Denmark, in spite of Denmark's hard line on Syrian refugees which continues today (Alfred & Holst, 2022).

Ukrainian Citizens

In February 2022, Denmark passed the 'Special Act' in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which allows specifically Ukrainian citizens to obtain a residence permit in Denmark. In 2001, the European Council introduced the Temporary Protection Directive to address the potential influx of non-EU citizens seeking asylum (European Commission, n.d.). This was activated for the first time after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, providing Ukrainian refugees rights such as residence permits, access to housing, access to education and access to social welfare (European Commission, n.d.).

Ukrainians may also get a residence permit based on family reunification (European Commission, n.d.). Ukrainians may also be granted a residence permit, if they are a close relative to someone who already has a residence permit under the Special Act (The Danish Immigration Service, n.d.-a). The vast number of Ukrainian refugees being accepted has sparked a debate surrounding migration in the EU, as many believe it is counter to the historical and growing anti-immigrant rhetoric apparent in the EU (Martini, 2022). The speed and size of support the EU has offered Ukrainian refugees has made many hopeful that the EU will consider an overhaul of the current asylum and migration policies (Martini, 2022).

II. Barriers to Participation for Migrant Women

In a democratic society, political engagement and participation through acts such as voting are critical for ensuring a just and equitable society. It is the primary way citizens can both integrate themselves into and help shape a society that represents the values and needs of all of its residents.

There are two directly opposite political perceptions of migration and integration in Denmark: one, that access to citizenship should be easy in order to make integration easier for migrants; and the other, that citizenship is a gift, which must be earned, thus the road must be long and difficult. The latter view is the dominant rhetoric in Denmark.⁸

Migrant women lacking full electoral rights is therefore a justice and rights issue, as it limits their agency and ensures they remain alienated from the decisions governing Danish society, and thus society itself. Voting rights in Denmark vary depending on nationality and residence status. Only Danish citizens (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands) can vote in the general elections to the Danish Parliament. Moreover, only Danish citizens are able to become parliamentary candidates and vote in referendums.⁹ Migrants who have become naturalised are thus citizens and can vote.

As an EU member state, Denmark organises elections to the European Parliament every five years. Only EU citizens can vote for European Parliament candidates. Individuals with residence in Denmark can choose to vote in Danish elections or vote for candidates in their home country. Similarly, EU citizens may run for office; however, they must first join a political party and be listed on the party's list of candidates. A group can form a party to be nominated. Independent candidates cannot run. Non-EU citizens are not allowed to participate in European Parliamentary elections as voters or candidates.

Regional and municipal elections are open for certain migrant voters. To be entitled to vote, both citizens of EU countries, Nordic countries, as well as non-EU-citizens must have permanent residence for three years

⁸ Kasper Møller Hansen. prof., Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen (in) Ulrik Dahlin: "Hver tiende voksne kan ikke stemme til folketingsvalget", Information, 14. Sept. 2022;

⁹ Folketinget, 07.09.2022. <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/democracy/elections-and-referendums>

before the date of the elections. Migrants who qualify to vote can also be candidates in local and regional elections and, furthermore, be elected to regional and municipal/city councils.

One of the interviewees of the survey conducted by KULU, Lisbeth Vibe Utzon, head of Integrationshuset Kringlebakken,¹⁰ believes that major changes should be made in legislation. She said that the lack of voting rights is “**a major democratic problem** [as] it has become so difficult to obtain Danish citizenship... we have a larger and larger group of women, in particular, who cannot vote in parliamentary elections. In Kringlebakken we have a group of women who have waited up to eight years to get their first residence permits. They are completely outside society. In addition, there is not enough information about voting rights in Denmark. Many migrants are not aware that they are able to vote in municipal and regional elections.”

The majority of decision-makers who took part in the survey identified the right to vote as the most important factor in improving migrant women's position in Danish political life.

In the survey, all decision-makers and experts are in consensus that **migrant women are more discriminated against than other women**. Migrant women, especially non-Western ones, face many barriers and struggles, even after living in Denmark after several years. This includes social isolation, trauma, lack of employment opportunities, etc. A study on migrant women's labour integration in Denmark showed that migrant women from Asian and Arab origins tend to experience racial discrimination and xenophobic attitudes at the workplace (Pace and Benetzen, 2022). These experiences lead to migrant women withdrawing from integrating with their work peers and avoiding partaking in social activities, especially with ethnic Danes. Ultimately, the lack of acknowledgement of this discrimination and the toll it has on the mental health of migrant women will lead to long-term barriers to their participation in Danish society.

The discourse surrounding migrants and the **lack of representation of migrant women in the media** presents another serious barrier. The lack of media representation acts as a barrier to participation for three primary reasons: there is a lack of migrant voices, which renders them invisible, a lack of migrant representation in topics of concern to them,

¹⁰ Integrationshuset Kringlebakken is an NGO that since 1999 has worked for equality, empowerment and integration of socially disadvantaged minority women and their children. Kringlebakken's efforts strengthen equality in the social, educational, business and health areas. <https://www.kringlebakken.dk/>

and when they do feature, the portrayals of migrants tend to be negative.

One study of Scandinavian newspapers found that under 1% of the 1244 news samples reviewed were written by a journalist with a minority background.¹¹ In 2021, 14% of the Danish population were either migrants or descendants of migrants, but only 3.5% were represented in media sources. This is a decrease from a previous study in 2016 where 12.3% of the Danish population were migrants or their descendants, while only 4% were represented in media. When topics on foreigners and integration are covered in the media, 20% of the news sources¹² are non-Western; however, these topics remained politicised, especially by many ethnic Danish politicians, according to a study of Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde University (2022). This study also found that while minorities are under-represented in the media, minority women, which includes migrant women, remain doubly under-represented with two men being mentioned for every woman. The gender imbalance applies to all women, regardless of origin. (Center for Nyhedsforskning, 2022).

Migrants are represented disproportionately negatively in media. A study by Hovden and Mjelde analysing the discourse surrounding immigration in Scandinavian countries from 1970-2016 found that Danish newspapers had a greater degree of negative representation. Danish coverage stands out due to its focus and divisiveness on immigration. The authors found that threat-related frames of discourse increased in Denmark, while victim-related frames of discourse decreased through the years of the study. Nearly a quarter of all stories in each country, including Danish media, use a humanitarian sub-frame, which highlights immigrants as victims of persecution and with inadequate living situations. About one fifth of the Danish items use a racism/discrimination framing. (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019).

¹¹ The study included 1244 news entities from 14 chosen days in 2021 with 3045 sources from 7 newspapers and 4 TV news broadcasts (Hovden, Jan Fredrik, and Hilmar Mjelde. 'Increasingly Controversial, Cultural, and Political: The Immigration Debate in Scandinavian Newspapers 1970–2016'. *Javnost – The Public*, vol. 26, no. 2, Apr. 2019).

¹² In this study, the researchers looked mainly at two types of sources. "Majority sources" refer to persons of ethnic Danish origin. "Minority sources" refer to persons of different ethnic origin. The study also differentiates between minority citizens of other Western and non-Western origins.

III. Participation of Migrant Women in Political Life

Engagement in political life includes the ability to actively participate in politics through individual and group actions, as well as interaction with executive authority. This includes individual actions such as voting, taking part in public referendums and running for political positions on all levels. The majority of decision-makers who took part in the survey identified the right to vote as the most important aspect that could make a difference to improving the position of migrant women in Danish political life.

It is mandatory to have Danish citizenship to be a candidate and be elected to the Danish Parliament. However, there are **female members of the Parliament** who refer to their migrant backgrounds. In the 2022 elections, **Samira Nawa** from social-liberal political party, Radikale Venstre, daughter of Afghan refugees (Radikale, n.d.), was elected, as well as **Monika Rubin** (the Moderates), who is part Polish and part Persian (Monika Rubin, n.d.). (Both are descendants of immigrants.) Additionally, **Christina Sade Olumeko**, who is Nigerian-French, was elected from the Alternativet (Solidaritet Danmark, n.d.), and **Victoria Velásquez**, whose mother is from Nicaragua, was elected from the Red-Green Alliance (Both of Danish origin because one of the parents is born in Denmark and has Danish citizenship). Samira Nawa thinks that the first step to achieve a better representation is that more descendants of migrants are running for elections. (TV2, Øst, 14.11.2022)

In general, women are politically engaged on all levels in Denmark, although migrant women face more obstacles (as discussed in the previous section). Looking at the Danish Parliament specifically, before November 2022, 38.9% were women - a slight increase from 2019 where 34.3% of all candidates nominated were women (Statistics Denmark, n.d.).

Nevertheless, this is still higher than the EU average of 32%.¹³ In the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, only 37.8% of candidates were women, and 35.7% were elected (Statistics Denmark, n.d.). Female representation in politics remains an important issue at the EU level.

In Denmark's 2022 General Elections, of all the candidates for the Danish Parliament, 38.4% were women. The final results saw the election of

¹³ Gender Equality Ministry: 'Sådan får vi flere kvindelige politikere og diversitet i politik' report, 8. March 2021

79 women, comprising 43.4% of Parliament's 179 seats. This is the best result in the history of Danish general elections, (Ritzau, 2022) showing improvement, yet still insufficient representation of women in politics.

The need for a larger female representation is more evident at the municipal/city council level where in 2021 only 34.1% of nominated candidates were women, with roughly 36% elected (Statistics Denmark, n.d.). Similarly at the regional council elections, of all candidates running, 36.1% nominated were women and over 50% of these candidates were elected (Statistics Denmark, n.d.).

When we look at **Denmark's government** from 2019 to November 2022, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen from the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokratiet), led a one-party, minority government, supported by a 'red-green'¹⁴ group of parties in the Parliament. Out of 20 ministers, six of them were women¹⁵ (30%). The new 2022 government represents 3 parties - the Social Democrats, the Moderates and Venstre – the liberal party. Mette Frederiksen, is Prime Minister and leads a government of 23 ministers, of which eight ministers, including the prime minister, are women (34,8%).¹⁶

An analysis of political party programmes of the main and most influential parties¹⁷ in Denmark, found no issues related directly to migrant women. Most of the political parties discuss the situation of migrants without specifying the gender perspective.

The programme of one of the right-wing parties, the Liberal Party (Venstre), mentions that fewer migrant women should stay at home and more should be active participants in the Danish labour market (Venstres Landsorganisation, n.d.). The programme does not suggest this for ethnic Danish women. The majority of the left-wing and centre parties agree on stopping the repatriation of refugees to states where the individual in question fears for their safety (Alternativet, n.d.). They are also against establishing a Danish asylum centre in Rwanda and work towards receiving UN quota refugees again.

Right-wing parties diverge on immigration, wanting to make the acquisition of Danish citizenship more difficult and considered on a more individual basis. Their agenda proposes greater integration, while re-

¹⁴ The Red-Green Alliance is a liberal group of parties with a major focus on environmental policy, but also social justice oriented policies. See more at: <https://vores.enhedslisten.dk/om-enhedslisten/enhedslistens-historie/>

¹⁵ Folketinget, 15.02.2023. <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/members/the-government>

¹⁶ Folketinget, 07.09.2022. <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/members/the-government>.

¹⁷ The analysis includes programs of Enhedslisten, Radikale Venstre, Alternativet, Moderaterne, Liberal Alliance, Venstre, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Socialdemokratiet, Socialistisk Folkeparti.

quiring migrants to speak Danish and participate in the labour market. They focus especially on non-western migrants. Some additionally support diverting asylum seekers to Rwanda or other countries outside of the EU in addition to a reduction of the annual refugee quota (Venstres Landsorganisation, n.d.).

IV. Participation in Democratic Life

Integrating migrant women is necessary to create societies that are fully inclusive and democratic. Migrant women often lead the way with regards to political activism and community leadership. One key way this is seen is through migrant women-led organisations, which are very active when it comes to supporting and engaging the integration of migrant women. Organisations were initially centred around helping migrant women to integrate via the job market and economic empowerment. Since then, organisations have expanded to address integration from all aspects, including rights, but also social engagement.

In Denmark, migrant women have various organisations and institutions that encourage them to participate in democratic life. Civil society organisations, including diaspora groups on local and national levels, organise activities and support migrants with various issues and obstacles they face in Denmark. These organisations include the Danish Congolese Federation (Dansk Congolesisk Forening), DBD - Diaspora Burundi in Denmark, Project Sultana, Kurdish Women's Association, Afghan Women's Association (Afghansk Kvindeforening, AKF), World's Women in Denmark (Verdens Kvinder I Danmark), and Blossom. Their outreach is visible to their diaspora groups and public activities attract attention.

Different institutions also provide assistance and advice to official bodies regarding migrant women. For example, the **Danish Refugee Council**: Denmark's largest NGO working globally to provide humanitarian assistance and support across all stages of displacement. They work with civil society, public authorities and companies to support migrant integration and coexistence. (Danish Refugee Council, n.d.)

There is also the **National Integration Council (Det Nationale Integrationsråd)**, which is an institutional body providing advice to the Minister of Immigration and Integration on issues involving refugees, immigrants, and integration. The Council attempts to identify lasting remedies to current problems in Danish integration initiatives by engaging strategically in numerous forums to create projects and actively participate in consultation rounds on new legislative proposals. The Council

is also a member of numerous committees and task forces that address integration on local, national, and international levels. Its purpose is to monitor and influence the advancement of integration. Logistically, council members are recruited from local refugee and immigrant associations, social partners and school boards. (Det Nationale Integrationsråd, n.d.).

In the survey that was conducted, migrant women were asked about their awareness of programmes and initiatives, or advocacy actions for the rights of migrant women at local and national levels. Half of the migrant women interviewed were not familiar with initiatives that support migrant women's participation in democratic life, while some were aware of some initiatives on the local level or by large organisations. The results of this survey further demonstrate the barriers impeding migrant women from fully integrating, participating and helping shape the society within which they reside.

Migrant women-led or women-led groups/organisations in Denmark

Babaylan-Denmark: Babaylan-Denmark is a network of Filipino women in Denmark and was established in 1997.

Babaylan-Denmark works on several fronts: political, cultural-educational, and social to improve the situation of Filipinas in Danish society and in the Philippines. Dialogue with and empowering au pairs has been a prioritised area of work. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064765116957>

Wo-Mi - Women Migrants: Wo-Mi is a platform created by a group of Latin American women that seek to advance the rights of all women and girls, focus on their needs and conditions, and promote an enabling and non-discriminatory environment.

<https://wo-mi.com/>

Diversity Works: One of the most long-established spaces for migrant women in Denmark, their work includes offering social activities such as yoga and educational classes. They also offer legal help and financial guidance, while furthermore helping with integrative tasks such as employment and citizenship.

<https://diversityworks.dk/>

The Neighbourhood Mothers: The majority of the Neighbourhood Mothers (Bydelsmødre) are women from ethnic minorities who volunteer their time in their local community to support marginalised women whom the established system finds challenging to reach. The provided assistance empowers the women to support their families, children, and other family members. <https://bydelsmor.dk/>

Conclusion

Migrants and migrant women specifically make up a significant portion of Denmark's population. Still, many barriers, particularly the lack of adequate political and media representation, in addition to strict avenues to citizenship remain. These barriers make participation and engagement both in political decision-making and Danish society as a whole difficult. This paper has not only provided general information regarding the legal, institutional and organisational structures surrounding immigration in Denmark, but it has also identified several ways of addressing barriers migrants face, of providing better communication and support with regards to citizenship and increased efforts to engage migrant women in local and general elections.

Based on answers from decision makers, experts, and migrant women, the most **important factors and trends** can be summarised as:

Right to vote:

Difficulties/barriers in obtaining Danish citizenship exclude a larger group of ethnic women from voting in parliamentary elections. The lack of knowledge of the right to vote in regional and community elections also excludes migrant women. (Lisbeth Vibe Utzon, head, Integrationshuset Kringebakken)

Political participation:

Migrant women are not very visible or active at the grassroots, or in local councils and boards because the rhetoric from the Parliament stigmatises, alienates, and disenfranchises them, although many have political knowledge and vote in parliamentary and community elections. (Sabad Abid/ Social Democrats, Høje Taastrup City Council). Civil society should be inclusive, and elected officials should not make derogatory remarks about migrant women. (Christina Olumeko/MP for The Alternative Party)

Media coverage:

The political rhetoric and news coverage reinforces a negative context. Any publicity is good publicity. A change in media coverage of migrant women's lives is needed. (Sabad Abid/Social Democrats, Høje Taastrup City Council)

Migrant women in leading positions on the local level and women in decision-making positions:

Use elected officials with migrant backgrounds to advocate for better representation of migrant women (Hediye Temiz/The Social Liberal Party, Albertslund City Council)

Self-organisation and financial support of migrant women in political issues:

Survival of migrant women's organisations requires support from stakeholders as well as financial support. (Ana Lindenhann/Babaylan-Denmark)

Educating and raising awareness of citizens about non-discrimination of migrant women:

Discrimination is perceived as a problem by decision makers, experts, and migrant women. All decision makers and experts think migrant women are discriminated against more than other women.

Affirmative action such as quotas:

Affirmative actions and quotas are necessary because members of boards/committees in different domains (whether it is boards of big companies, or parent committees in local day-care institutions) tend to elect people from their own education background and/or gender. Quotas will create new role models. (Sabah Abid/Social Democrats, Høje Taastrup City Council)

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