

# Denmark has great maternity leave and child care policies. So why aren't more women advancing? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Read online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

In Denmark, we are well known for our welfare system — a system that is supposed to give women and men equal access to the job market and equal possibilities of making a career. We have daycare, schools, and other public institutions at the top of global rankings. Both men and women have great opportunities to have their loved ones (whether children or elderly relatives) taken care of during the daytime, allowing them to work. These institutions help us secure a high level of gender equality in the job market. We are often listed as being in top of the class when it comes to equal access to education, and the standard of our education is high. More Danish women complete higher education than Danish men.

Given all of this, we rank surprisingly low — 80th in the world — when it comes to leveling out the gender gap in leadership. On this metric, countries like Ghana, Venezuela, and Guatemala perform better than we do. Our well-educated women do not advance into leadership positions, and we rank 39th in wage equality for similar work. In the past 20 years, the number of female top executives has risen only from 10% to 15% (1995-2015). Only 6% of all chairpersons are women. The core problem is obvious: The Danish companies are wasting talent and missing economic growth opportunities.

Given that in countries without access to affordable daycare, gender-equal education, or paid parental leave, Danish-style welfare systems are often touted as ways to get more women into senior leadership roles, we think the example of Denmark sounds a cautionary note — and an example worth exploring more deeply. Why aren't our strong social welfare institutions translating into gender parity at the top? And perhaps more importantly, what would make a difference?

In particular, we see two issues that need to be fixed for more women to advance to leadership roles:

### Paternity leave

Danish women perform just as well as Danish men early in their careers. However, when the first child is born, a dramatic shift takes place. As one can see from the graph below, women's careers never recover from having a child.

[Line graph available to view online: "Danish women's earnings drop after the birth of their first child. Men's earnings don't."]

Denmark is frequently listed as having some of the best parental leave policies in the world: new parents get 52 weeks of leave (with at least partial pay) that they can share. The mother is guaranteed 18 weeks of this at full pay, fathers get two weeks, and parents can decide how to split the remainder. So why is having a child so disastrous to female earning power?

One reason may be that the majority of the parental leave is taken by the women. Even though fathers could take up to 32 weeks of leave, the average father only leaves for 30 days, while the average mother leaves for nearly 300 days.

And even though access to parental leave is guaranteed by law, in many workplaces, taking parental leave is not the custom. This makes it much more difficult for the fathers to insist on taking their part of the parental leave, strengthening the bond to their children and letting their wives back into the job market. (In Sweden and Iceland, by contrast, 90 days of paternity leave are granted only to men as a way of pushing dads to take their leave.)

Managers have a special responsibility to lead the way. However, most male Danish managers are taking leaves of 14 days or less. (Disclosure: We are currently running a campaign in association with the Danish Minister of Equality in an attempt to solve this issue.)

## Role models

As in other countries, the lack of women in top roles is self-reinforcing. As the saying goes, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” We need many women on many stages. Different women. With different values. As it is right now, we still have quite some way until we get there.

A Danish media consultancy recently published their yearly analysis of “CEO Superbrands” with only three women among the Top 40 of Danish executives. The low number is not due to a lack of female “superbrands.” It is due to the absence of women in top management positions.

As an ambitious woman, it is not easy to picture yourself as a CEO if all the CEOs you see are men in dark suits. A recent study among Danish managers shows that the average picture of a successful manager is a picture dominated by masculine skills. In the top of the executive level, the female CEOs have just as many masculine stereotypes as their male counterparts.

The solution, of course, is not to get rid of the men, but to gain a more nuanced image of the typical executive. Both male and female executives have the ability to do this. The media also plays an important part in deciding how to portray women and men in leadership roles.

Danes should of course be proud of their strong welfare system, and there is much there for other countries to learn from. But although our public institutions secure a high level of gender equality in education and entry-level jobs, we have more work to do to achieve equality at the senior-leadership level. Countries that are hoping to strengthen their own social welfare policies should also be aware that offering affordable daycare and paid maternity leave are a good start, but not enough.

**Related link:** Children and gender inequality: Evidence from Denmark [3]

**Region:** Europe [4]

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**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/05/denmark-has-great-maternity-leave-and-child-care-policies-so-why>

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