

# KØN - GENDER MUSEUM DENMARK: Whose museum?



## CASE STUDY

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# KØN – Gender Museum Denmark: *Whose museum?*

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## Abstract

This case study explores the Danish Women's Museum's change of name to KØN - Gender Museum Denmark in 2021, in particular, the underlying development and public framing of this change process and how it taps into the broader Danish cultural policy agenda of providing access for all and an increased focus on gender equality.

This case exemplifies and explores questions of inclusiveness, equality, access, and audience development. KØN's internal and organizational development from a grassroots movement to becoming state-recognized and fulfilling cultural policy goals. It traces the direct influence of cultural policy measures on the practice of cultural institutions.

Keywords: Grassroots community, women's history, gender, museums, activism, Danish cultural policy, equality, inclusivity

## Introduction

This case study explores the *Women's Museum's* change of name to *KØN - Gender Museum Denmark* in 2021, specifically the underlying development and public framing of this change process and how it taps into the broader Danish cultural policy agenda of increased focus on gender equality. This case study will roughly trace the development from a women's movement without formal hierarchies and organizational structure to what is now known as an established museum in Aarhus. The case illustrates a cultural institution in constant development, where changes have been introduced internally and externally. Triggered by an official assessment by the Agency for Culture and Palaces (SLKS) in 2015, the Women's Museum changed and broadened its focus from women's history and culture to gender history and culture. Yet, five years passed between this decision in 2016 and the museum's name change. We want to focus on these five years in this case study.

As this case will show, the development and movement of implementing a more inclusive gender perspective has been ongoing for several decades in the Danish cultural world. The example of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark will highlight these efforts which were initiated by a grass-roots movement and that now have arrived in established institutional circles. This transition is marked by the museum's name change from *Women's Museum* to *Gender (KØN)*. The way that the museum describes its role, its collection, and most prominent objects now reveals a development from its feminist, female-centred, activist roots to a more inclusive/encompassing approach:

KØN is one of the world's few museums with a focus on gender history and equality. The museum tells stories that are rarely told. From corsets to the Kussomat, from the history of democracy to penis extenders, from the Red Stocking movement to sex hormones, from macho culture to MeToo, from births to paternity leave... (KØN Annual report 2021)<sup>1</sup>.

On a more general level, these developments are not happening in isolation. It is a part of a more significant trend in cultural policy regarding inclusion and equality, with a recent example being the Danish Ministry of Culture's announcement of a new focus on gender equality in cultural institutions (Ministry of Culture, 2022b). This seems to mark an important moment in Danish cultural policy, focusing on an area that has been debated and criticized for a while in both research and practice. The gender imbalance in the museum sector is roughly characterized by a female overrepresentation in terms of visitors to museums and skewed towards male artists in terms of art acquisition and exhibition.

## Methodology

On the backdrop of this intersection of the museum's development as well as the cultural policy recommendations, this case lends itself to an in-depth exploration of the following questions:

- How is inclusive practice understood in the case of KØN?

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes have been translated from Danish to English by the author.

- What happens when a public institution, which has been focusing on an area of underrepresented and under researched topics, broadens its area of responsibility<sup>2</sup> and audience?

This case study is based on two levels of analysis, exploring both the cultural policy framing of the process by document analysis, as well as the museum’s public framing of the name changing process via content analysis of the museum’s online communication.

*For the cultural policy framing* of the process, the time frame starts in 2015 with the Ministry of Culture’s quality assessment. The analysed documents include among others the Agency for Culture and Places’ evaluation, as well as the museum’s strategy documents.

The period of analysis for the museum’s *public* framing of the process and related reasons starts with public communication about the change of their main area of responsibility and the related name transformation process, which was announced on 15 September 2020, and ends with a retrospective podcast interview in May 2021.

**Table 1a.** Analysed material.

Author	Ministry of Culture / Agency for Culture and Palaces	Museum
<b>Document analysis of cultural policy framing of area of responsibility</b>	Quality Assessment Report 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual reports 2020 and 2021</li> <li>• KØN strategy 2020-2025</li> <li>• KØN ‘Vision og Mission’</li> </ul>
<b>Content analysis of public framing related to name change</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Podcast episode, in which the museum’s director describes the name change</li> <li>• Selected online communication (see table 1b)</li> </ul>

**Table 1b.** KØN’s online communication platforms and the content analysed for this study.

Platform	Website	Facebook
		13,344 followers (May 2021)
<b>Old name / URL</b>	kvindemuseet.dk and konmuseum.dk	facebook.com/kvindemuseet
<b>New name</b>		facebook.com/konmuseum
<b>Content analysed</b>	6 Blog posts and Press releases	5 Museum posts Reposts of website content

<sup>2</sup> The term “area of responsibility” (Danish “ansvarsområde”) describes the museum’s main thematic focus.

## Context / background of case (including cultural policy context)

### *Cultural policy context*

Denmark is one of few countries which has a specific museum law, *the Consolidated Act on Museums*. One of the main responsibilities of the Agency for Culture and Palaces is making sure that the public, so called state recognized or state subsidized, museums follow the law in terms of responsibilities connected to the five pillars of collecting, registering, preserving, researching and disseminating (Ministry of Culture, 2006).

One of the instruments of ensuring that individual museums fulfil all their goals is a regular assessment of the current economic and museal state, in which the Agency makes recommendations and sets goals that need to be reached to keep receiving public funding from the state. Approximately one hundred Danish state-subsidized museums are subjugated to a quality assessment at least every tenth year, conducted by the Ministry of Culture. This instrument will be described further in connection to KØN's change of the area of responsibility and change of name.

### *Background and development of the museum*

KØN - Gender Museum Denmark has focused on women's history throughout its existence and practice since 1982, having rooted its visitor-centered and institutional practice in feminist thinking (Ipsen, 2017). The museum is relatively small in terms of staff and visitor numbers. The institution has about ten full-time employees. The annual visitor numbers are around 40.000 (before and after COVID-19 restrictions). Despite the size, in terms of area of responsibility, the museum has a unique and perhaps leading position in Denmark and the world. In its mission statement, the museum directly relates to overall societal values of culture.

KØN will be leading dialogue creators about the importance of gender and create insight, engage and strengthen the will for an equal society.

With the experience at its core, KØN creates curiosity, dialogue, reflection and knowledge about gender, equality and diversity – Historically, currently and in the future.



Figure Error! No text of specified style in document..1. Wall text about the museum's history and video installation about the founding years on the first floor of KØN in Aarhus.

The *Women's Museum* in Aarhus was founded by the grass-roots movement *Women's Museum Society* with the goal to ensure women's representation in museums and the bigger historical narrative. Simultaneously the museums served to create employment for women, which were at that time affected by high unemployment rates. The former director of the museum and one of the founding members, Merete Ipsen, describes the founding years as follows:

In the very beginning, the management style of the museum was based on a high level of democracy: all members of the society had an equal influence over decisions. We had to raise money, find a house, employ people, and make plans for collecting objects, conducting research and setting up exhibitions. As plans were formed and decisions were made, the mechanism of the “practico-inert” was part of the institution. Although we started as an open group with equal powers of voice, it became clear that a form of hierarchy was needed. (Ipsen, 2017, s. 319–321).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (1960).

In the following, a (short) history of the museum is presented to highlight the transformation throughout the years, focusing on the last years leading to the change of

### Timeline

**1982:** The activist grassroots association "Kvindemuseet" (Women's Museum) is founded by a group of women in Aarhus.

**1991:** State recognized as a nationwide special museum with responsibility for women's cultural history in recent times.

**2012:** The Women's Museum changes institutional format from association to self-governing institution.

**2015:** The Agency for Culture asks the museum in a **quality assessment** to become to a greater extent "a cultural offer for a wider segment of the Danish population" (Agency for Culture, 2015).

**2016: Change of area of responsibility** to the cultural history of the sexes/gender ("køn" in Danish denotes both meanings). Gender, equality, and diversity are added to the women's historical focus.

**2019:** March 8 (International Women's Day): Initiation of **new director**, Julie Rokkjær Birch.

**2020: Internal assessment of the museum's brand and role**, with the help of a creative agency, with help of i.e. focus groups, amongst others examining the strategy of a name change.

**15 September 2020: Facebook debate** starts immediately after public announcement of plans to change the museum's name, not yet decided on the new name.

**16 September 2020: Petition "No to changing the Women's Museum's name"** is initiated by former members, receives a total of 3011 signatures (*Nej til at ændre navn på Kvindemuseet*, 2020).

name as a marker of this development.

### Description of the concrete cultural policy instrument and mechanism of emancipatory practices

#### *Cultural policy instruments: Museum quality assessment*

As mentioned before, the principle and process of "continuous monitoring" is followed to obtain the status of public, state-recognised museum and thus receive direct funding. This is done in two ways: the Ministry of Culture's nationwide museum statistics and using regular

(circa every ten years) quality assessments of the individual museums (Agency for Culture and Palaces, 2016). As part of this process, SLKS conducted a quality assessment of the Women's Museum in 2015, in which it noted that "The Agency for Culture recommends: that the museum revise its statutes and reformulate its responsibilities to establish an alignment between the museum's responsibilities, mission and vision" (Agency for Culture, 2015). The following quote from the assessment report illustrates what is meant by lack of alignment.

The core of the *area of responsibility* is women in recent cultural history.

In the future, the museum will work with gender and gender relations:

The museum's *vision* is: The Women's Museum will be a leading dialogue creator on the significance of gender in society.

The museum's *mission* is: The Women's Museum will foster curiosity, dialogue, reflection and knowledge about the meaning of gender historically, currently and in the future with a focus on women.

There is currently no alignment between the statutory responsibilities of the Museum and its mission and vision.

It is relevant that the museum will work on gender and gender relations, as the museum's previous focus on women may be a contributing factor to the fact that only 19% of the museum's users are men. (Quality Assessment Report 2015)

The analysed report displays a clear expectation towards the museum to broaden its focus area to include more than 'just' women. It is worth noting the last point in the previous quote, relating the museum's area of responsibility to the composition of its visitors. Clearly, this assessment not only criticizes strategic focus area misalignments but also critically mentions the gender composition of the museum's audience – seemingly without any proof. Interestingly, they seem to establish a connection between the focus area of the museum and the gender composition of its visitors, however, without further explaining the reasoning behind this assumption.

In conclusion, the quality assessment report stated that the museum did not reach a wide enough audience since the majority of visitors were women (ca. 70%). As a state subsidized museum in Denmark, part of the requirements is to be accessible and of use to all (Dam Christensen, 2007). The agency thus required an adjustment to the focus area. The Women's Museum was asked to become "a cultural offer for a wider segment of the Danish population" (Agency for Culture, 2015). Since 2016, the adjusted Women's Museum's area of responsibility, or its mission, is as following.

The museum's thematic area of responsibility is the cultural history of the genders. The museum's focus areas are gender culture, historically and currently, based on women's history, including changes in gender conditions and relationships over time as well as diversity in living conditions across gender, sexual orientation, androgyny and ethnicity. The museum's geographical area of responsibility is nationwide. The museum's temporal focus is from the Middle Ages to the present. Based on the area of responsibility, the museum must safeguard cultural heritage in Denmark and develop an understanding and



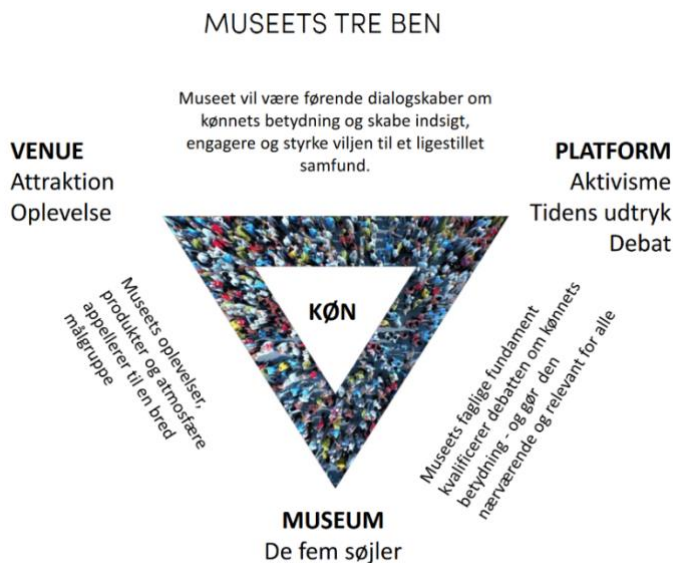
significance of this in the world around us, locally as well as internationally. (KØN 2021b)

The new museum mission now clearly draws on ideas of feminism as more inclusive and intersectional, thus in line with more recent developments in gender studies generally.

This supervised transitioning process is still ongoing. As recently announced, the museum received an additional two million kroner (ca. 280.000 €) by the Ministry of Culture to support the transition in focus from women’s history to gender (Ministry of Culture, 2022a).

### *Museum practice supporting societal values of culture*

When looking at the societal values of culture and how this case of KØN relates to specific goals, it becomes obvious that the museum actively seeks to promote these values through its practice. For example, figure 2 shows the museum's so called “three legs”: KØN as a venue, platform, and museum. Activism and debate are situated within the platform. This illustrates what makes this institution and its practice rather unique: it does not only situate its practice within the walls of the museum, and it does not only restrict itself to being a traditional cultural institution. Furthermore, it becomes clear that a traditional setup of exhibiting objects is not considered sufficient for promoting values and discussing societal challenges.



[Translation: clockwise, starting with title.]

### THE MUSEUM’S THREE LEGS

The museum seeks to be leading dialogue creator about the meaning of gender and create insight, engage, and strengthen the will for an equal society.

**PLATFORM:** Activism, the expression of time, debate

The museum’s professional foundation qualifies the debate about the meaning of gender – and makes it present and relevant for all.

**MUSEUM:** the five pillars

The museum’s experiences, products, and atmosphere appeals to a broad target group

**VENUE:** Attraction, experience

Figure 2: KØN's "three legs": venue, platform, and museum. From the museum's 2020-2025 strategy (p. 7)

### *Emancipatory practices*

The case of KØN reveals an interesting double meaning of the term emancipatory: emancipation in the sense of the women’s movement, which now also includes a plurality of genders and identities. This understanding of emancipation clearly reminds of the beginnings, a grass roots movement by women for women. Throughout the years, the meaning of the word emancipatory is in development, changes with the museum’s practice

as well as international trends in gender studies and culture in general where questions of equality and social justice have become an increasing part of public discourse. It is mainly the museum's activist practice, which aims to create a forum for discussing such relevant themes, which increasingly define modern societies' development.

Emancipation can also indicate the process KØN has been following as a cultural institution with growing responsibility and professionalism, especially concerning being state recognized. With the institution growing older and slowly establishing status as an independent institution - not an association – the museum altered its organizational format. It changed from multiple flat hierarchy leaders to one single museum director. In this analysed period, a shift in leadership roles took place, as the previous collective management format of the museum, was succeeded by just one leadership position, which former employee Julie Rokkjær Birch filled. The following quote from the museum's press release exemplifies that this new (type of) leadership also brought with it a new chapter for the museum. „The generational change has been expected since co-founder and former museum director Merete Ipsen announced her departure in the autumn after 36 years in the museum's service. [...]” (Women's Museum, 2019).

### [Analysis and reflection on challenges/achievements / impacts of emancipatory practices](#) *Whose museum?*

The museum's framing of the change of the area of responsibility and name has shifted throughout the years. When the museum back in 2016 announced its new area of responsibility, it made sure to add the following statement by the then director on its website announcement:

The Women's Museum extends its area of responsibility but retains its name. This marks the fact that research, collection and dissemination are based on a feminist approach. Furthermore, the name Women's Museum in Denmark enjoys great recognition around the world, says Merete Ipsen (Women's Museum, 2016).

In terms of museum practice and international recognition, the museum felt it necessary to hold on to their close ties to the women's movement. In a book chapter about the museum, the director explicitly states that the museum keeps its name to “demonstrate the feminist perspective underpinning our research and actions” (Ipsen, 2017, 339). However, it becomes very clear that the framing of a new area of responsibility here was not tied to a wish to make a statement, moving away from the feminist activist roots of the museum.

However, some years later, KØN's current director sees and frames the development as a natural progression within its history and the academic discipline of gender studies. In the podcast episode, the director says she was surprised by people's reactions to the name change. The transition from the Women's Museum to Gender Museum, has been (mis-) understood as identity politics (Nielsen-Jexen, 2021). This could partly be due to the timing of the name change, as it was happening during a time (end of 2020) of heated public debates about cancel culture, still ongoing debates connected to #MeToo, as well as general uncertainties in the world caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In retrospect, Rokkjær-Birch reflects in an interview on [kunsten.nu](#) that "It's not far from being called modern curse

words like 'identity politics' and 'political correctness' - but I think it's more about us as cultural institutions understanding that we matter to people" (Salling, 2021).

Having established this focus on creating a space for debate, the museum has formulated guidelines for online discussions, primarily regarding discussions on its Facebook page. Here, we see a marker of the museum's new direction towards including narratives and issues that do not solely focus on women's perspectives but represent the diversity of genders. In practice, this resulted in more posts about male issues, and a few about diverse LGBTQ+ related topics, often announcing events organized by the museum. The following statement on the website highlights the museum's understanding of gender/KØN:

Much has changed in the world of gender perception since the *Women's Museum* Society saw the light of day; also, men's role and function has changed significantly. In some areas, the cultural heritage still rests upon the old-fashioned division between gender and roles, whilst the present expects a more open display of all genders (KØN, 2021a).

This framing of its development exemplifies that the museum, perhaps in several steps throughout the years – after the assessment as well as the new leadership – has directed its focus at being more inclusive, using distinctions such as 'old-fashioned' and 'present'. Inclusiveness here can be understood in two ways: fulfilling roles of having to attract higher audience numbers with a certain gender balance (which is measured in binary gender conceptualizations) (step one). Furthermore, in terms of a progressive mindset, which is tuned into current discourses, steering away from binary logic (step two).

#### *Online markers and discussions of change*

The public discussion of the name change took place on several different platforms, such as national news, TV debates, physical fora organised by the museum, and on social media. It was the latter, more specifically on Facebook, where the museum's direct communication was met by many comments and reactions by users. Those posts and the reaction illustrate the tensions that persisted throughout this whole transformation process. The active phase of announcing the decision to change the name and the actual announcement of the name change lasted roughly three months. The first Facebook post, and a press release on the website, announcing the initiation of a name change process appeared on September 15, 2020 (Women's Museum, 2020). The museum's original post reads:

The Women's Museum shifted its legal area of responsibility from the life and work of women to a broader focus on gender, equality and diversity as early as 2016. This development needs to be communicated more clearly to the museum's users. The museum is now exploring how. Nationwide surveys and focus groups will help the museum understand how best to create the conditions to bring the Women's Museum into a new era where women's history, gender culture and equality are all on the agenda.

The museum's post announcing the final decision to change the name to KØN was put online on December 5, 2020 (KØN, 2020b). This last announcement post has received 1213

comments, 565 likes, 145 love, 167 sad, and 100 angry (as of March 2022). To put that into context, in the period from 2016-2021, the museum's Facebook posts have had nine comments on average.

As mentioned, the change of name was not only discussed on social media but also had a lot of attention from the public in the form of newspaper articles, opinion pieces, radio and television features and a public petition against the name change. The critique both included politically motivated points of view from conservative debaters and, e.g., members of the *Women's Museum Society*, who questioned whether this change would still be beneficial and in support of the women's rights movement. Especially the response on the museum's social media account on Facebook could have been an opportunity for the museum to engage in discussions with their followers openly. However, the online comments to the posts announcing the name change process show a very passive interaction, in which the majority of the museum account's comments could be defined as discussion rule enforcement or content moderation: setting the tone for a good debate, since some of the users' comments were perceived as too polarized.

One of the comments by the museum, directed at the criticism, refers directly to the official strategy decision, which was encouraged by the Agency: "In response to many comments: the museum is not changing its focus. The museum already did that in 2016. Women's history is and will remain an integral part of the museum - but in the presence of more gendered perspectives on our past, present and future" (KØN, 2020c). The museum thus points out that the name change merely retrospectively reflects the change in the museum regulations, which had been initiated five years earlier.

This analysis leaves an unanswered question: whether the museum has been so much in charge of its own decisions and how much of its current role is a natural development, is not fully certain. What has been crystalized here is the current museum's narration of this development, which has naturally led to this broadening of its area of responsibility due to internal and external developments.

#### *Discussion: Fluid inclusion*

This case study sought to trace a development of a cultural institution in transition, finding both old and new ways to stay relevant to a growing group of people, to promote values of inclusiveness, tolerance, and increasingly identity and belonging. This was a counter-activism, which reacted to a growing awareness of inequality in Danish society. The museum then built itself as an institution, guided and controlled by the Ministry of Culture and the Agency for Culture and Palaces. While the museum's interest might have initially focused on women's rights and equality, the 2015 quality assessment demanded a broadening of the area of responsibility and setting a goal to attract *more male visitors*. This was also reflected in 2017, when the former co-director of the Women's Museum asked: "Most of our guests are women. Is it possible to reach more men?" (Ipsen, 2017, 338). Like in the quality assessment, the central focus seemed to be on including male visitors and narratives into the museum.

Interestingly, the museum does not publish its statistics based on gender. However, in recent years the composition of visitors has drastically changed regarding *age groups*. In

2021, according to the national museum visitor survey, as many as 63% of the museum's users were between 14-29 (excluding all school visits). The average for Danish museums is 17% in this age group (Agency for Culture and Palaces, 2022). At the time of the assessment in 2015, 57% of the visitors at the Women's Museum were older than 50 years. Commenting on this development, the museum's director writes: "However, it would be a self-defeating goal to blindly go after young people just 'for the sake of it.' Distinction of museums is important, and the self-awareness of each museum is crucial. It is about integrity" (Rokkjær-Birch, 2022, 49). This quote speaks to one of the significant challenges in setting goals as a public institution, as well as cultural policy: it is not necessarily the most direct approach that leads to success, i.e., to the fulfilment of goals such as the democratization of culture. A simple cause-effect relationship is hard to achieve when it comes to something as complex as culture.

If KØN had just sought to fulfil the immediate recommendations made in the quality assessment, they could have risked losing fundamental aspects of inclusivity. The KØN case, in fact exemplifies *several notions of inclusiveness*. Stemming from the original activist logic, the museum and the then women's society were fighting to *include female narratives and histories in museum and society*. The cultural, political goals of *culture being for all*, however, is somewhat in opposition to this, as the assessment demanded a broadening of both focus and visitors (in terms of *gender and age*).

Differing goals exemplify the challenges inherent in creating an inclusive cultural policy. Yet, this case showed how the museum, in a state of transformation, has managed to reconnect to activist roots, not afraid of debates, and still achieve the goals set by the cultural policy agenda. Moreover, the director emphasizes that KØN wishes to be a role model for other museums regarding diversity in its practice and dissemination (Nielsen-Jexen, 2021).

This case demonstrates a fascinating conundrum in cultural policy. Does everyone need to be included? Having analysed some commentators' reactions on Facebook about the name change, one can see that not all visitors feel the need for a "more inclusive" policy. Many critical voices of this name change fear losing emancipatory power for the original women's movement. For instance, reactions by the initiators of the online petition against the name change show that this inclusion might have excluded others. For example, in February 2021, after the decision about the name change was made official, the initiators of the petition wrote in a comment, "Thank you for your signatures and thank you for your letters – we keep an eye on what was the Women's Museum, but should it change its name to KØN – Gender Museum of Denmark, you will not be able to meet us there" (*Nej til at ændre navn på Kvindemuseet*, 2020).

## Conclusion

The change of name became a fast but heatedly debated marker of the shift of direction for KØN. It resulted from both cultural policy control and the museum's development. The emancipatory process described in this case exemplifies a growth from grassroots to arm's length while keeping control over the terms. From an organizational perspective, KØN has

undergone a significant change in the role of leadership, from democratic townhouses to one 'charismatic' leader who sets the tone.

The museum has chosen to include gender(s) on its own terms. The cultural policy recommendation might have demanded the inclusion of men. However, internal changes in the museum's leadership, the self-perceived role in the society, along with the development in Danish society in general, have picked up on the recommendation and expanded it to be more inclusive. The museum's revised vision now states that "the museum will be a leading dialogue creator on the importance of gender and create insight, engage and strengthen the will for an equal society" (KØN strategy 2020-2025). However, some of the visitors' reactions as well as the visitor statistics following the ongoing change process, show that the outcomes might differ from the intended goals.

So why choose a new name? Gender signals a new chapter in the museum's internal history and its self-perceived role as dialogue creators about critical societal topics. The name change signifies a reorientation back to its activist roots, however, from a different standpoint. KØN aims at a transition from activism by a group of like-minded women for the local community, to activism by the museum (leadership) for a more extensive, international community.

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