

Social Rights Monitor

2021

Country Monitor: Denmark



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SOCIAL EUROPE

Just like other EU member states, Denmark is experiencing increasing social inequalities, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure a smooth recovery from the significant economic and social hardships hitting the entire social fabric, the National Strategy Group (NSG) recommends prioritising the protection of employment and the creation of new jobs. This should be done through closer cooperation between the branches of the Danish government, civil society, and the trade unions. In light of the newly demonstrated acute need for accessible healthcare for everyone, the National Strategy Group recommends readdressing healthcare provision. It should be changed so that migrants, undocumented people, and refugees can access professional healthcare facilities without fearing expulsion or deportation.

	2018	2019	2020	EU-27 2020
GINI index¹	27.8	27.5	27.3	30.2 (2019)
Unemployment²	5.1%	5.0%	5.6%	7.1%
Gender Equality Index³	/	77.4	77.8 (2021)	67.9
In-work poverty⁴	6.1%	6.3%	6.1%	9.2% (2019)
Housing Overcrowding⁵	9.2%	10.0%	9.5%	17.1% (2019)
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor⁶	OPEN	OPEN	OPEN	N/A

Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

Missing data for 2020 are not available at the time of publication of the Social Rights Monitor 2021.

Equal opportunities and fair working conditions

Fair working conditions and access to the labour market have for a long time been closely monitored by the daily presence of trade union representatives in most workplaces. **Despite the pandemic, Danish trade unions remained on the frontline, thanks to their high membership and role in collective bargaining.** They had successful consultations with the Danish government and employers' organisations on equal opportunities and working conditions, and they concluded 14 tripartite agreements – between government, trade unions, and employers organisations – which was the highest number of agreements signed in such a short period since this form of social dialogue was established in 1987. The agreements quickly responded to the

disruptions caused by the health and economic crisis: 12 had direct effects on Denmark's welfare system.⁷ The National Strategy Group highlights one on temporary wage compensation for furloughed workers, which entered into force on 14 March 2020 and gives employees compensation equivalent to 75% of their salary.

Despite the positive support from social partners to mitigate the unemployment crisis during the pandemic, unemployment benefits in Denmark are far from universal. **To be entitled to unemployment benefits, people must meet several strict requirements that often hinder access to social assistance.** Requirements include continuous membership of the unemployment insurance fund for

1 Eurostat (2021). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12

2 Eurostat (2021). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2021). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/DK>

4 Eurostat (2021). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

5 Eurostat (2021). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en

6 CIVICUS (2021). Civic space monitor - Denmark: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/denmark/>

7 Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation (2020) One year – 14 tripartite agreements: <https://fho.dk/blog/2020/11/22/et-aar-ti-trepartsaftaler/>

at least one of the previous three years and a gross income of at least DKK 243,996 for full-time insured employee or DKK 162,660 for a part-time insured employee. In addition, beneficiaries must be registered at a job centre (physical or online), where they must update their CV and other documents and be actively looking for employment.⁸

INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Despite several programmes developed throughout the year to assist newcomers to Denmark, many obstacles still hinder the inclusion of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. As reported by the National Strategy Group, foreign workers residing in Denmark have to be in a full-time employment for at least three-and-a-half years to obtain permanent residence. Moreover, it is problematic that eligibility requirements cannot be fulfilled when any kind public social assistance has been received over the five previous years. For this reason, many immigrant workers in Denmark do not dare register as unemployed, even if they have lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Nevertheless, the National Strategy Group reports that some positive steps have been made in the context of the expansion of “integration basic education” (IGU).⁹ It is a programme for 2021-2024, which aims to help refugees entering the labour market through specific training and courses in collaboration with both job centres and educational institutions.

However, Denmark has undertaken a hazardous action against migrant people without legal residence, the National Strategy Group reports. **Migrants without legal residence who reached out to the Danish national health-care system for Covid treatment were isolated in asylum centres** (either Center Brovst in North Jutland or Center Gribskov in North Zealand). **After recovering, they were sent back to their countries of origin.** This decision was criticised strongly by several NGOs. Among others, Rådet for Socialt Udsatte, the Council for the Socially Vulnerable, and Gadejuristen, the Street Lawyers, said that such measures would have negative consequences for the whole population, as it would likely lead people not to get any medical treatment for fear of being repatriated. They would therefore avoid testing and isolation.¹⁰

GENDER EQUALITY

Despite the generally high employment rate among women in Denmark (73.2%, in comparison to 77% among men in 2019),¹¹ Danmarks Statistik – the Danish statistics agency – reports that both **wage and pension gaps persist**.¹² The wage gap between men and women in 2019 was 12.8%, a figure that has been decreasing since 2005, when the gap was 16.2%. The inequality is believed to result from several factors, in particular the traditional understanding of “male” and “female” jobs, the greater extent of part-time employment among women, and maternity leave being significantly longer than parental leave.¹³

8 FOA (2021) Unemployment benefits eligibility: <https://www.foa.dk/a-kasse/ledig/dagpenge-abc/dagpenge-feriedagpenge-dagpengeplus>

9 KL (2020) New agreement on strengthening the integration basic education: <https://www.kl.dk/forsidenyheder/2020/december/regeringen-og-arbejdsmarkedets-parter-enige-om-styrkelse-af-integrationsgrunduddannelsen/>

10 See the press article with the declaration of different NGOs on the topic of repatriation of migrants after treatment: <https://arbejder.dk/indland/fagfolk-kritiserer-regeringens-coronaindsats-overfor-hjeml%C3%B8se-migranter>

11 Statista (2020) Employment rate by gender, Denmark: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1166044/employment-rate-in-denmark-by-gender/>

12 Danmarks Statistik (2020) https://www.djoef-forlag.dk/openaccess/samf/samfdocs/2020/2020_1/Samf_2_1_2020.pdf

13 Aarhus University (2020) Gender equality in Denmark is a myth: <https://bss.au.dk/insights/business-2/2020/ligestilling-i-danmark-er-en-myte/>

According to the European Gender Equality Index 2020, Denmark remains the second highest performer – after Sweden – in gender equality. **The National Strategy Group finds that the biggest challenges to gender equality in Denmark are an unequal participation of fathers in parental leave; a low number of women in leadership positions; and so-called gender-segregated jobs, which are closely related to the wage gap, as jobs typically considered to be women's are paid significantly less than those traditionally considered to be men's.**¹⁴ To address the lack of women in leadership and decision-making positions, the Danish Ministry of Transport and Housing introduced several practices. Firstly, half of all participants in training as potential leaders have to be women, and managers must openly discuss the barriers faced by women when applying for managerial positions. Secondly, since 2020, the department requires an equal distribution between women and men of tasks that provide management experience, and it encourages male employees to take parental leave. The success of the initiative is currently being monitored in the department's annual wellbeing survey.¹⁵

To favour higher participation of fathers in parental leave, the length of paternity leave has been increased slightly. The most recent tripartite agreement, OK2020,¹⁶ introduces longer parental leave for fathers and co-parents, who can now claim up to eight weeks instead of the previous five. The leave is fully paid and cannot be transferred to the pregnant parent. The National Strategy Group recommends monitoring whether the extension in paternity leave mitigates the pay gap between men and women in the future.

ADULT VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2020 can be considered a successful year for reforms to improve vocational education and training. **The reforms have been focusing on preparing the Danish labour force for new demands in various specialisations after the corona crisis.** According to the agreement,¹⁷ unemployed people over the age of 30 are entitled to enrol in and attend a vocational education training course. If this is in an area where there is a labour shortage, they will receive unemployment benefit raised to 110% of the normal level. The choice of training is therefore strictly related to demand in the labour market, but it is still possible to train in other domains. If an unemployed person wishes to start vocational education in an area that is not recommended, they will still receive 80% of their unemployment benefit. These initiatives aim to prepare the Danish labour force for new demands for different specialisations after the Covid pandemic, **as well as for the green and digital twin transitions.**

All unemployed people have also been given the right to a short vocational course from the first day of unemployment, so that they can receive updates and training. Nevertheless, the National Strategy Group reports that the scheme's main limitation is its requirement of being over 30 years of age and a member of an unemployment insurance fund.

14 EIGE (2021) Gender Equality Index – Denmark: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/DK>

15 Ministry of Labour (2020), Ligestilling i Stat, Kommune og Region / Gender Equality in the State, Municipality, and Region <http://www.ligestillingidanmark.dk/files/rapporter/7239-Inspirationskatalog.pdf>

16 KVINFO (2020) OK2020: <https://kvinfo.dk/ok2020-giver-mere-ligestilling-med-faedreorlov/>

17 The Danish Agency for Labor Market and Recruitment (2020): <https://bm.dk/arbejdsomraader/aktuelle-fokusomraader/ledige-loeftes-i-krisen/>, <https://virk.dk/myndigheder/stat/STAR/selvbetjening/Voksenlaerling/#tab1>

Social protection and inclusion

SOCIAL HOUSING

Public housing is an important element of the Danish welfare system. According to the Danish Ministry of Transport and Housing, there are about 540,000 public housing units, and around 1 million Danes today live in public housing.¹⁸ In 2021, housing benefit is a maximum of DKK 4,230 per month, a 2.3% increase from 2020, which is only a slight improvement considering the economic hardship that the pandemic caused households and families. In 2021, loans can be granted for both apartments and single rooms. As a general rule, the municipality must grant a loan if the household's income is below certain designated thresholds.¹⁹

Overall, the National Strategy Group considers these changes mildly positive, as they can benefit many people. However, they are predominantly linked to annual inflation rates, so they do not adequately reflect the extent of economic insecurities experienced by many Danes in 2020.

In addition, **the Danish Parliament reached an agreement in May 2020 to allocate DKK 30.2 billion up to 2026 for the green renovation of public homes.**²⁰ The agreement aims to encourage healthy and up-to-date public housing. Though it is too early to provide an assessment of the initiative, the National Strategy Group expects it to generate positive effects for the environment and for residents' housing expenses.

HEALTHCARE

The Danish healthcare system is publicly funded, which means that all citizens or registered foreigners have the right to be examined, treated by a doctor (including both a general practitioner and specialists), and be hospitalised free of charge. **The Danish public healthcare system ensures there is little inequality in access to medical care between the lowest- and highest-income residents.** A 2020 OECD report found that in 2017, only 1% of the population felt they had unmet medical needs due to payments, waiting times, or distance.²¹ Moreover, the country's health spending has been increasing over the last decade and is now higher than the European average. Danish healthcare planning and delivery is assigned to regional and local authorities, so the system is rather decentralised.

The National Strategy Group reports that undocumented migrants are Denmark's most vulnerable group when it comes to access to healthcare. Under ordinary circumstances, a patient must provide proof of identity and present a health insurance "yellow card" before seeing a doctor. Therefore, although hospitals are obliged to provide adequate medical assistance in acute situations to everyone regardless of their status, undocumented patients still face numerous issues. These include a lack of medical records, language barriers, and the fear of expulsion if reported to the authorities by public officials working in healthcare.

18 Danish Ministry of Transport and Housing (2020) <https://www.regeringen.dk/nyheder/2020/bred-politisk-aftale-om-groen-renovering-af-almene-boliger/>

19 Kerteminde Kommune (2020) Loans for residents: <https://kerteminde.dk/borger/borgerservice/laan-til-beboerindskud>

20 Ministry of Transport and Housing Ministry of Climate, Energy and Supply (2020), political agreement on green renovation of public housing: <https://www.regeringen.dk/nyheder/2020/bred-politisk-aftale-om-groen-renovering-af-almene-boliger/>

21 OECD (2020) State of Health in the EU – Country Health Profile 2019: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/5eede1c6-en.pdf?expires=1629627663&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=F5BD6469C860C063899EF7C461574A66>

POVERTY

According to a recently published OECD report, **Denmark has the third lowest proportion of citizens with a disposable income less than half of the median.**²² However, the pandemic and its measures reversed the positive trend. In January 2020, the Labour Movement's Business Council reported²³ that the number of Danish residents living in poverty was stagnant, if not increasing. Over the rest of the year, 15,000 families applied for Danish People's Aid seasonal help packages, the highest number in the last 14 years.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Employment jointly announced that in 2021 the government would introduce a new poverty-line calculation²⁴ to monitor poverty more closely and help it to pursue active labour market and social policies.

Good Practice – Ellengården

A positive example of cooperation between NGO services and governmental institutions is Bostedet Ellengården in Aarhus, a self-governing institution that operates under an agreement with the Aarhus municipality.²⁵ Approximately 50 families per year are offered temporary accommodation and professional support. The organisation, a network of 18 nationwide organizations, supports such placements with support from the government. The programme offers 13 emergency apartments and 11 longer-term “eviction homes”, where support is offered for up to two years to people who have been evicted. The main beneficiaries are women and families with children under the age of 18 who do not have – or cannot stay in – their own home.

Civic space

Civic space in Denmark is considered to be open by CIVICUS, which carries out frequent monitoring activities.²⁶ **Although Denmark has a long tradition of safeguarding individual rights and personal freedom, the Covid-19 pandemic imposed severe restrictions on citizens and civic liberties, as happened across Europe and beyond.**

During 2020, no changes were reported in the area of freedom of association, which is guaranteed by Article 78 of the Danish Constitution.²⁷

This grants the freedom to establish an organisation, provided that its purpose is in accordance with the law.

In Denmark, as in other European countries, the boundaries for imposing restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly are blurry. Indeed, the National Strategy Group reports that the current interpretation of the constitution assumes that a general restriction, such as a ban on assembly, must be “necessary and proportionate”. During the pandemic, according to the

22 CEPOS (2021) Danmark har den 7. laveste ulighed blandt OECD-landene: <https://www.cepos.dk/abcepos-artikler/0004-danmark-har-den-7-laveste-ulighed-blandt-oecd-landene/>

23 Andersen, L. (2019) Combating poverty requires social policy action: <https://www.ae.dk/debatindlaeg/2019-11-bekaempelse-af-fattigdom-kraever-socialpolitisk-indsats>

24 Joint statement by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Employment (2021): <https://sm.dk/nyheder/nyhedsarkiv/2021/maj/vi-vil-bekaempe-boerndefattigdom-i-danmark>

25 Ellengården - home for homeless families: <https://www.aarhus.dk/borger/personlig-hjaelp-og-stoette/kriseramte-familier/ellengarden/>

26 CIVICUS (2021) Denmark: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/denmark/>

27 Danish Constitutional Act: <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/democracy/the-constitutional-act-of-denmark>

initial precautionary measures from 17 March 2020, the restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly were not sanctionable: they served only as guidelines, advising against the gathering of large crowds. Initially, this referred to groups of more than 1,000 people, but the restrictions were later tightened to apply to groups of more than 10.²⁸ Nevertheless, the regulations did not apply to private homes or assemblies for political or other causes, such as demonstrations.²⁹

Discussion of freedom of speech in 2020 has generally been positive in Denmark. Human rights organisations monitored and reported on precautionary measures imposed by the Danish government and their potential effects on freedom of speech. In April 2020, the Freedom of Expression Commission published a monitor that highlighted the Danish public's continued support for free media and their consequent high degree of trust in free journalism.³⁰

The national recovery and resilience plan

Denmark has a longstanding tradition of civil organisation, voluntary work, and collective bargaining. This reflects a culture of mutual cooperation between the public, private, and third sectors. As reported throughout this chapter, social partners played a crucial role during the year, concluding 14 tripartite agreements. These mainly addressed unemployment, working conditions, and social security schemes. **However, the National Strategy Group reported that the situation has unfortunately not been the same for civil society organisations. These pointed to a lack of consultation and involvement, both in Covid-19 measures and in drafting the national Recovery and Resilience Plan.**

Good Practice – The Civil Society Strategy: A Handbook

The Danish Civil Society task force recently released a handbook containing a list of recommendations for the government's civil society strategy.³¹ These were translated into 12 concrete initiatives under three headings: participation and community for all; an infrastructure that supports people and helps them develop; and knowledge. The handbook says that a strong civil society fosters social cohesion and generates voluntary commitment to take personal responsibility on common issues. In the end, such action will benefit the whole community.

28 Danish Government (2021) Covid-19 Emergency Laws in Denmark: <https://svjt.se/svjt/2020/1098>

29 Institute for Human Rights (2020) Seven Recommendations for the next health crisis: <https://menneskeret.dk/nyheder/syv-anbefalinger-naeste-sundhedskrise>

30 Danish Freedom of Expression Commission (2020), Ytringsfrihed i Danmark / Freedom of Expression in Denmark: <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/sites/default/files/media/Pressemeddelelser/pdf/2020/ytringsfrihedsundersogelse.pdf>

31 The Civil Society Strategy: <https://sm.dk/media/8127/strategi-for-et-staerkere-civilsamfund.pdf>

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