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# Difficult issues around gender

**Abstract** Museums can be safe places for unsafe facts. Museums can frame debate and ideological as well as political discussions.

We started the Women's Museum in Denmark 35 years ago as pioneers. We focused on the untold and developed outreach programmes. The Museum got the reputation of giving voices to the minorities, telling non-told stories and let ordinary people search for knowledge in the past and know about hidden or shameful realities.

Over the years we make research on difficult subjects such as refugees and religion, drugs and alcohol, prostitution and trafficking and about rape, ending in exhibitions with different target groups. Historical background is used for understanding why people today can act as they do. Ethical dilemmas and solutions of using authentic contemporary stories will be presented. Our ambitions are not to be a place of social healing. We want is to be a place for social reflection, tolerance, understanding of difficult conditions and accept of diversity.

**Keywords** gender, ethics, uncomfortable, outreach, trafficking, rape

Why talk about gender and difficult issues? – In the Nordic countries, in Germany, yes in all Europe, men and women officially are seen as equal. Even so, we at the Women's Museum in Denmark (Aarhus) feel that talking about gender can still be a provocation. Gender is seen as women's stuff, not a common issue. Men and masculinity are neutral, women and femininity are gendered. Women's Museum in Denmark want to change that sort of gendered blindness.

Often men coming together with a female partner pronounce before buying a ticket to our museum: 'I don't think I am allowed to come in'. They are! We invite men as well as women to visit and use our museum. We invite boys as well as girls.

From the very beginning the Women's Museum got the reputation of telling the untold and showing controversial themes. Through praxis, we learned that it is possible to focus on emotional and political issues, and to do it in ways that move the visitors – for good and for bad. The museum started as a grass root movement in the early 1980s.

## Motherhood

A museum should involve its users. We did when we invited young, unmarried mothers in our first project to collect documentation about being a single mother. In the 1980s it was still a problematic social situation not to take care of a man if you bring up a child. The young mothers we hired were unemployed and most of them uneducated. Together with us, middleclass-academically-educated researchers they were equal partners in interviewing women, who have raised children as single mothers in older generations. The young mothers supplied the interviews and the interpretation of the collected oral stories with their special insight knowing. This gave a better documentation and afterwards a better exhibition. The history of motherhood was one of the core subjects in an exhibition in 1984.

How motherhood had developed is an important question – also how fatherhood had developed. The shame for unmarried women to get pregnant and give birth to a child was a burden for women and single mothers – while it was not a shame for a man. His fatherhood was invisible. Norms and traditions on sexuality and marriage have changed. Helped by the pill. Today a growing number of single mothers take care of their babies, and a growing number of fathers want to be emotional parents too. New life-conditions produce new paradoxes!

## Immigrants and refugees

Another important question is how is it to be an immigrant or a refugee in Denmark? Women's Museum set up a network for immigrant and refugee-women. They can come here and have a mentor – a Danish or well-integrated volunteer who give advice on how to send an application for a job, where to buy healthy food, how to be a mother for your teenage-children in the Danish society etc. In a one-to-one relation the two meet at the museum, in a library, in their private home – and are invited to special introductions to new exhibitions in the museum or organize other network activities by themselves. Reality is that very, very few persons with foreign ethnical background visit the museum. When special arrangements are made for no-white target groups, it is easier to attract other than people similar to the mainstream.

From inside the mentor network invited women with different cultural backgrounds to enter a community of role models who together and alone



Fig. 1: Women's Museum in Denmark, 2008: visit at the museum where a role model is the host © Women's Museum in Denmark

could go outside the museum to tell their specific story about their reception in Denmark and about becoming a part of Danish society. One night each week they took turns being the hostess in the exhibition; receiving visitors and telling them about their own life with a childhood in Australia or in Iraq or in Nigeria and an adult life in Denmark. They and guests at the museum got into dialogues about love, marriage and divorce, about headscarves and freedom, about children and successes and defeats (fig. 1, p. 181). Today the mentor network still is active.

### Trafficking, drugs and rape

Over the years we have made research and shown exhibitions about drugs and alcohol, about trafficking and about rape. As a women's museum it is important to show the positive as well as the dark side of the globalisation.

We are aware of illicit traffic of cultural objects. Trafficking for prostitution is an even bigger problem. Prostitution and trafficking were subjects of an exhibition shoved in a container – a room for trafficking for the market. Members of the Danish Parliament participated in a debate meeting discussing the criminalization of customers for prostitution.

Making an exhibition about women and alcohol and drugs was taking part in setting an agenda where the museum is co-demanding a political solution for children who grow up in a home marked by addiction, and co-demanding better offers for women who want detox and a clean life. Alcohol is for pleasure – but alcohol and drugs is also a problem in several families. It is much more difficult for children to grow up with an addicted mother, even though it is difficult enough to have an addicted father. Addiction affects the children. Where can they direct their anger? Where can their addicted mothers find help?

Women find it hard to regain the respect of their surroundings after a life of addiction. Is it because of our gendered bias? Our Viking heritage forgive a man and understand that he sometimes wants to go berserk and have fun with the boys. When a man comes out of addiction, he is described as strong-willed. For women there is almost no return. When women come out of addiction, they still are seen as the former – the former drunk, the former junkie.

We Danes are proud of our Viking-culture even though we know, they murdered and raped on their journeys. We showed a copy of an old Viking illustration in our exhibition about rape on a time-line where we presented

myths and historical facts about rapes – telling that our culture in a historical perspective is based on rape. From the middle ages until now interpretation and laws on rape have changed; first to protect the property of a father or a husband, today to protect the victim. With the historical line, we presented rape as a cultural heritage – a cultural heritage we could do without. We called the exhibition *IT IS not YOUR FAULT*. We prepared the exhibition over two years and it was made in close co-operation with counselling organizations and drop-in centres who work with sexual violence daily, as well as with the police. They became part of a working group providing us with contacts to rape victims and knowledge of the complexity of the issue: is rape sometimes just another word for bad sex? How can you be sure when there are no witnesses?

We should not create exhibitions *about* someone, but *with* and *for* someone. During the exhibition process the people it is all about – the former victims – have been involved. They gave their stories to the museum. The focus group helped us specify how to present the paradox of being a victim but having to get on with your life. The objects in the exhibition were the personal stories telling about different rape experience. The Museum had many ethical considerations along the way. The exhibition should not come off as a sob story; it should not invite sexual fright; and it should not dig the gap between the genders deeper by accusing men as rapists.

Using personal stories is a trust issue. We use them to create identification. We want to reach people's feelings – without abusing people's emotions. We want to communicate stories from real life without exposing the persons who gave the museum their present days stories. We solved this problem by making the stories anonymous and gave the persons new names and new voices by letting acting school students from the local theatre tell their stories. Visitors could listen to the stories on headphones or see them told on a screen by silhouetted figures. The tellings in the exhibition were authentic – but they were still anonymous. We selected seven stories – among them a boy. A scout leader assaulted him. For the museum, it was important to tell that also boys can be victims. Being a boy made it extra hard: his masculinity was wounded because rape happens to girls. So, was he a kind of girl? Now he is almost 40 and has been under treatment, but he has still not found any joy of sex.

We did not describe the rape itself because we did not want to present something in which some weird persons may find a pornographic effect and visit the exhibition because of that. The exhibition invited identification and reflection. The target audience for this exhibition was 16- to 20-year-olds.

The main part of all rapes takes place among young people who know each other already. We wanted the exhibition to have a preventative effect by encouraging young people to take responsibility for each other. Encourage girls to set borders and encourage boys to listen and to understand a 'no'. We held workshops for young people. The boys were just as eager as the girls were.

## Dialogue

How to react if an exhibition opens visitor's emotional trauma? Exhibitions can trick memories. You never know but exhibitions dealing with difficult issues can reach forgotten memories or hidden anger. A guest in the exhibition can be alone, and we do not know what she or he think. It is important to prepare the staff to take care. They shall not be therapist ore social workers, but you can try to prepare them so they can stand up for difficult meetings with guests.

It is not so 'dangerous' with events and debate meetings. You are present when you discuss difficult issues as domestic violence one night, anorexia another night or more easy topics as female authors and gender philosophy. You are in direct dialogue with the audience. Museums are perfect places where people can meet and discuss. Vulnerable and excluded groups can find their situation presented in an unbiased manner in a historical and contemporary context.

Diversity and different political position can also be taken inside museums. As long as there are fewer women candidates than men, the Women's Museum will organize special meetings before elections to the National Parliament, to the EU Parliament and before local elections. For the Women's Museum, it is important to be active in supporting the democratic process in a world where democracy is not a given. We also have a school programme called *The Historical Way to Democracy*.

## Girls and boys

Gendered life start in childhood. You can find some historical background and in a gentle manner give children the opportunity to play with and explore gender differences and similarities. We have developed various learning programmes and a permanent exhibition about the history of girls and

boys – here they can experience changes in childhood and gender roles. In the exhibition, they can climb on staircases, write on the walls and chose identities of children from older generations. The main point in the exhibition for reflection is:

- » Gender and identity are part of our cultural heritage.
- » Gender is a large part of children’s psychological identity even though gender discrimination has been abolished.
- » For immigrant children gender plays an explicit role.
- » In a global perspective gender balance can be a problem where the wish for a son is dominant and overproduction of male children a reality.
- » Children can learn to look at gender difference as a resource.

Part of our newest learning programme focus on body and sexuality. We want the young people to accept the diversity: some are slim, some are high, some are small and some are thick. We are born different – and we grow up different.

In a historical frame, we tell how their great grand mothers’ generation used corset to be slim lined, and tell about their rebellion and wish to be free. We want young people to tell what body freedom is for them. We show a corset near a poster on anorexia and ask, if the physical corseting has been replaced by a psychical corseting. We want children and young people to be norm critical and encourage them to accept their own body and most of all: show respect to each other.

## Gender culture

In 2016 the Women’s Museum changed the purpose from focusing explicitly on women’s history to developing a museum for gender culture. The roles of women in our society have gone through remarkable transformations. The role of young men have done the same. Gender questions are seen as women’s stuff – we want it to be important for all.

In a new exhibition *Gender Blender*, we show gendered items from everyday life. We invited people to come and donate gendered objects to the museum together with their explanation on why and how they use them or interpret them as gendered. Regularly we will have donating meetings of that sort – and display the new objects in our exhibition. The exhibition also

discusses gender and identity. You can find many sorts of gendered orientation today and it is not any longer a question of being woman or man, heterosexual or homosexual orientated. More than a dozen various categories for sexual orientations are identified of people belonging to one (or more) of them.

Oral histories are used in the exhibition. One of them, a Muslim guy, gave us his history but want to be anonymous. Some months after opening the exhibition our curator got a letter:

Through my work with the Women's Museum I have been allowed to treat the subject 'gender' and contribute with the minority-ethnic-LGBTQ+ perspective based on my own experiences as a homosexual Muslim. As a minority ethnic LGBTQ+ person it is double stigmatized. Homophobia, racism and social control are ongoing among our target groups in Saabah.<sup>1</sup> Women's Museum gave me a platform to discuss prejudices about sexuality, gender identity and ethnicity with themes such as rights, religion, norms and discrimination. The work I have done with the museum has been a springboard – because to tell my story helped me. My contribution was completely anonymous. I experienced great professionalism and a deep insight and understanding of the vulnerability that you can have as a homosexual ethnic minority. Today my parents know – they did not before. The Women's Museum showed interest and recognition of the work Sabaah – Aarhus has made to ensure and emphasize minority ethnic LGBTQ+ persons rights as some of the first in Aarhus.

Our Museum wants to tell the untold, we want to work with minorities, and we want to reach people as activist and engaged citizens. In March 2017 we planned a gender festival – with demonstration as in the 1970s on 8 March, a men-only party at the 9 March and a cross-gender evening at 10 March. It was a success. Especially on 8 March. Around 1,500 women and men walked from the museum to the city hall and back through the city in a Pussy-demonstration (fig. 2, p. 187). After the election of Trump in America, the new women's movement over there came to Aarhus.

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1 Sabaah is a voluntary association working to improve the conditions of LGBT+ people with minority ethnic backgrounds.





Fig. 2: Street demonstration on 8 March 2017 © Women's Museum in Denmark

## Guidelines

I have not told about war trauma or political suppression. My examples are all about how to encourage people to be more self-confident and feel more safe to take responsibility for other people and for the society they live in. Praxis around difficult issues in museums can be a challenge for all. As museums, we cannot find the right methods just out of our good hearts or with a lot of emotions. From our experiences around difficult issues in Women's Museum we found that you need to have different praxis when you talk about:

- » collection, where you meet people maybe for the first time,
- » exhibition, where you interpret and let guests alone in the exhibition with their interpretations and feelings,
- » school programmes, where you and a teacher are present,
- » debate meeting and event, where you can facilitate and take part in a dialogue.

We have to improve our skills in handling personal stories and now living people's reactions. We shall discuss what to do and how. Let us use this ICOM Conference *Difficult Issues* to learn from each other, support each other and be stronger together. The first step could be to develop a sort of guidelines for handling difficult issues. Some of the guidelines could be:

- » Have time to go back to an interview person who have told you something she maybe never had told to anybody before
- » Train your staff in listening to people in your audience
- » Be prepared in communication with guests who are affected: offer them a cup of coffee or a silent corner in the Museum where they can sit
- » Give your staff a list of telephone numbers for professional assistance and therapist
- » Invite diversity
- » Ask colleagues how they do

Museums can deal with difficult issues. We already do. Together we can be even better. Let us combine our most fruitful approaches - and continuously make our museums better at collecting, showcasing and inviting diverse stories and different communities in order to contribute to the societal dialogue on difficult issues.