

# DEFINITION

## PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AT AARHUS UNIVERSITY 1938-1968

Ph.d.-afhandling af Pernille Svare Nygaard



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

# Professional Women at Aarhus University 1938-1968: Following the Archival Trails of Women Who Pursued Higher Learning within Nursing and Home Economics

Danish School of Education, DPU, Aarhus University: *Professional Women at Aarhus University 1938–1968* investigates the academicisation of nursing and home economics as professions for women, focusing on the educational journeys of women who balanced professional identities with academic aspirations. The dissertation explores the intersection of gender, higher education, and professionalisation during a pivotal period in Danish history.

## Women's entry into higher education

One overall finding of the thesis is, that Danish women's paths to university were, in part, facilitated through the profession-based courses in nursing and home economics established in 1938 and 1945. This underscores the importance of looking beyond the well-documented pioneer narratives of the first women from the upper middle class who gained access to university. Instead, it is important to recognise the many women who found ways to enter academia through their engagement in traditionally female professions.

## The academicisation of professional qualification programmes

Another key finding of the thesis concerns the academicisation of professional qualification programmes in the twentieth century. While the nursing and home economics courses at Aarhus University did not attain master's status and were typically classified as specialised or continuing education, my analysis shows that their establishment aimed to scientise and

academicise these female-dominated professions. These programmes thus represent an early attempt to integrate professional education into academia.

### Female figures

By applying feminist theory, the dissertation explores how women navigated the boundaries between professional training and academia, challenging static notions of “the woman”. These boundary figures moved between traditionally feminine domains and male-dominated academia, positioning themselves as both challengers and contributors. Their liminality reshaped perceptions of their professions within higher education.

### Modern womanhood

The concept of womanhood has taken on a significant role in the thesis. Here, womanhood has a dual role as both a limiting and an empowering factor; womanhood appears to function as a constraint when juxtaposed with or in competition against male-dominated fields. In such cases, womanhood is often framed as a challenge or an obstacle. Conversely, womanhood operates as an empowering driving force within fields historically dominated by women. In these contexts, womanhood is not merely an inherent characteristic but is actively mobilised as a strategic argument for advancement.

### Gender, education, and professionalisation

The dissertation concludes that the academicisation of traditionally female professions at Aarhus University reconfigured both the professional and personal trajectories of women, challenging the boundaries of education and gender roles in Denmark.

Through a diffractive reading of archival materials, the study centres the voices of “ordinary” women, showing how their stories provide a nuanced understanding of gendered professionalisation and education during the mid-20th century.

### Contemporary relevance

The findings provide valuable insights into the ongoing discussions about gender equality and diversity in education and the workplace, illustrating how historical perspectives can inform present-day debates about access, inclusion, and professional identity.

## Facts about the empirical foundation of the dissertation

The dissertation is based on extensive archival research, including personal letters, students' applications, memoirs, students' scrapbooks, university records, educational policy documents, and newspaper articles from 1938–1968. These sources illuminate women's educational journeys and the societal context shaping their experiences.

## About Pernille Svare Nygaard

Pernille Svare Nygaard holds a Master's degree (cand.mag.) in European Ethnology and earned her PhD from the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University. She has been an integral member of the research project *The Women's University: Aarhus University 1928–2000*, led by Professor Ning de Coninck-Smith.

Pernille's research centres on the historical intersections of gender, education, and professionalisation in 20th-century Denmark, with a particular focus on the academicisation of traditionally female professions such as nursing and home economics. By employing feminist and post-structuralist theoretical frameworks, her work sheds light on the experiences of women navigating the boundaries between professional training and higher education during a period of significant social and educational transformation.



## Contact

Pernille Svare Nygaard

Mail: [pesv@edu.au.dk](mailto:pesv@edu.au.dk)

Tel.: 25110784

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Miss Hulda Pedersen teaches young girls in natural history.

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