

What do we know about structural inequality and racism against Greenlanders in Denmark?

It is with great humility and some reservations that we enter the debate on the relationship between Denmark and Greenland. Can we contribute with anything that has not already been said? Do we risk that our voice takes up space at the expense of the Greenlandic voices that are currently shaping the media landscape and who are the ones who should be shaping the media landscape and the discussion? That is the last thing we want. But based on our conversations with Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark over the past year, both around structural racism and whether we, in Conductive Space for Peace (a Danish registered but internationally based civil society organisation), have a role to play in creating change, we feel a responsibility to contribute to the Greenlandic-led fight for equity. We speak from where we stand and not on behalf of others, let alone Kalaallit/Inuit.

At Conductive Space for Peace (CSP)ⁱ, we have, since the beginning of 2024, consulted a wide range of actors and organisations in Denmark working with equal treatment of Kalaallit/Inuitⁱⁱ (Greenlanders) in Denmark. This article is based partly on the knowledge we have gained from these conversations and partly on studies conducted over the past ten years, focusing on racism and equal treatment of Kalaallit/Inuit in Danish society. Furthermore, we hope to contribute with experiences from our work to promote equity between the Global North and the Global South in international institutions, as well as our experiences of supporting efforts to combat inequity, racism and marginalisation both in conflict-affected areas and in Denmark.

At the end of 2024, CSP, together with Nauja Bianco and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), received funding from the EU (via Global Focus) to initiate a project that will create space and opportunities for the exchange of experiences, knowledge sharing and idea development among organisations working in various ways with equal treatment of Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark. The goal is to do even more to eradicate inequity, prejudice and structural racismⁱⁱⁱ and instead ensure equity and equal treatment.

By Mie Roesdahl, Co-Director and Founder, Conductive Space for Peace

In the wake of President of the United States of America, Donald Trump's, announcement about gaining control of Greenland, there has been a fierce debate about the relationship between Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) and not least about inequity or lack thereof. It is good that this is being debated openly and that awareness of the inequity and racism that many Kalaallit/Inuit (Greenlanders) face in Denmark is being raised. In this article, we will discuss what we know about structural inequity and racism against Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark and what we know about structural inequity and racism from other contexts that can give us insight into the Danish reality. In the following blog posts, we will dive into what other contexts are trying to do to change structural inequity and racism.

Prejudice and structural racism - what do the studies say?

Several studies and reports, including by the Danish Institute for Human Rights (IMR) and the National Research Centre for Welfare (SFI), document that Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark face widespread prejudice, unequal treatment, and structural racism in contact with public institutions and in the wider society. Culturally insensitive parenting tests¹, , and inadequate options for interpretation services when dealing with Danish authorities are just a few of the many examples of barriers to equal treatment, often with

disastrous consequences for the people affected. Almost half (44 per cent) of the Kalaallit/Inuit responding to SFI's survey in 2014 pointed to problems with stigmatisation and a prejudiced attitude from ethnic Danes, both in contact with public authorities and in other contexts, including workplaces.²

Similarly, a 2024 study, conducted by the Knowledge Centre for Rehabilitation and Palliation for Aalborg Municipality, shows that socially vulnerable elderly Kalaallit/Inuit are "extremely marginalised", which is explained, among other things, by the fact that "the historical shadows of colonisation and rapid modernisation contribute to stigmatisation, othering and exclusion".³ The socially vulnerable position that older Greenlanders find themselves in carries over into the social and health areas and "limits real access to the systems. The logic and structure of the systems make them difficult to access". In the book "Ulighedens Drejebog"⁴, Morten Sodemann and Kristian Larsen show how the Danish healthcare system, created by wealthy Danes, fails to create equal opportunities for the economically and socially disadvantaged in society, whether Kalaallit/Inuit or ethnic Danes. For example, it is typically more difficult for vulnerable citizens to use the 10-15 minutes of consultation time in a way that the doctor subsequently understands what the problem is. This results in inferior treatment. It

goes without saying that language-challenges and cultural barriers do not help. Kalaallit/Inuit are overrepresented in the socially vulnerable group in Denmark and make up 7 per cent of the total group of people experiencing homelessness, and in Aalborg the figure is as high as 22 per cent.⁵

Students experience racism

It is not only the vulnerable who are affected by prejudice and structural racism, and it is not just a thing of the past. A study of Greenlandic students in Denmark shows that prejudice and exclusion permeate society and affect even the most well-functioning Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark.⁶ Within a 12-month period, 73 per cent of Greenlandic students have experienced negative comments about them as Kalaallit/Inuit or about Kalaallit Nunaat to varying degrees, and over half of those surveyed say they are met with prejudice because of their Greenlandic background. The study also shows that those who experience prejudice in particular have poorer well-being and a greater risk of not completing the programme. So, there is a correlation between being exposed to racism and how you fare economically and socially. From an equity perspective, it is of course criticisable that students with a Kalaallit/Inuit background face challenges in terms of gaining equal opportunities with other students in education. In addition, Kalaallit/Inuit enjoy special protection by virtue of the ILO Convention on Indigenous Peoples. This obliges the Danish state to remove linguistic and cultural barriers that Kalaallit/Inuit may experience when encountering Danish culture, including in education programmes.

Foreign policy participation

In the debate that followed in the wake of Trump's statements, Greenlandic politicians expressed a desire for greater participation in foreign policy forums. For example, it is surprising that Greenland is not represented in the Permanent Danish Mission to the UN in New York, even though the mission has multiplied as a consequence of Denmark's membership of the Security Council in 2025-26. However, progress has been made in domestic policy, and Member of Parliament, Aaja Chemnitz, has stated in the past week that last year she participated in five major negotiations with the participation of all parties, which was not the case just 3-4 years ago. "Nothing about Greenland without Greenland" is the principle, but it must be said to be a minimum principle, as Kalaallit Nunaat is expected to have political views on the involvement of the Danish Realm, including Greenland, in the rest of the world. This has not become less important in the years that Kalaallit Nunaat has moved towards independence. With the Self-Government Act of 2009, Kalaallit Nunaat was granted the right to self-determination, and since then the various governments of Kalaallit Nunaat have taken steps towards independence. With this in mind, it would be natural for Denmark to purposefully strengthen Greenlandic participation in all international forums.

Recognition as a national minority

Participation in domestic policy decisions is limited by the fact that Kalaallit/Inuit are not recognised as a minority in Denmark. As the Danish Institute for Human Rights wrote

in the 2015 report: "People of Greenlandic origin are not adequately represented in official forums such as the municipal integration councils or the Council for Ethnic Minorities because Greenlanders are not formally considered an ethnic minority".³ The report has clear recommendations to "establish a dialogue with representatives of Greenlanders in Denmark about whether Greenlanders as a group living in Denmark want to be recognised as a national minority". This has not happened yet, although in 2023 the parties in Kalaallit Nunaat unanimously decided to explore the possibilities of asking Greenlanders in Denmark if they want to become a national minority. In Denmark, the German minority in Southern Jutland is the only population group recognised as a national minority under the Council of Europe Framework Convention.^{iv}

Language and interpretation

In the documentary 'Twice Colonized'⁷, Aaju Peters tells the story of being sent to Denmark, like so many other Kalaallit/Inuit, as part of the 'danification' plans of the 1960s and 70s (G50 and G60)^v and when she returned to Kalaallit Nunaat, she had lost her language. She is not alone in this. About 10 per cent of Kalaallit/Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat do not speak Greenlandic, while about half of Kalaallit/Inuit do not speak Danish.^{vi} Of course, there is simultaneous interpretation in Inatsisartut (Greenland's parliament). In Canada, which also has an Inuit population, simultaneous interpretation of five indigenous languages was introduced, first in the Senate in 2008 and then in the House of Commons in 2019. In Denmark, it was only introduced in 2024 and will only be made available for a limited number of parliamentary meetings of special importance to the Danish Realm. This progress only happened because Member of Parliament, Aki-Mathilda Høegh-Dam, only spoke Kalaallisut/Greenlandic for the second year in a row from the rostrum in the parliamentary chamber during the opening debate.

Kalaallit Nunaat on the school timetable

Many explain the challenges of racism and equal treatment as a lack of knowledge about Kalaallit Nunaat. This is evident in the Danish Institute for Human Rights report from 2015 and 2023. And in 2025, researcher and lecturer, Minik Rosing, states in the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's debate programme,⁸ that Greenlanders know how to get from Odense on Fyn to a place in Jutland, while Danes barely know the name of Greenland's capital, Nuuk. Danes only hear about Kalaallit Nunaat when it concerns beautiful nature or tragic incidents like suicide, he says, and explains that when he was in school, they learnt something about Greenland, but today it is virtually nothing. In 2019, a majority in the Danish Parliament decided to make teaching about the Realm between Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands compulsory in primary school history lessons, but the implementation of the decision was not realised until the 2023/2024 school year, and Greenland is still minimal in the overall curriculum.⁹

Although a number of organisations working with equal treatment of Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark, including the Greenlandic House in Copenhagen, have school services

that can supplement the established curriculum, a very small proportion of the total number of school children benefit from it. There are far too few resources to reach a sufficient number of classes and students. When primary and secondary education do not ensure a basic level of knowledge about Greenland, it is difficult for civil society organisations to contribute to building the necessary knowledge and capacity among the public servants who must ensure equal treatment. They have to start from scratch by sharing basic knowledge about Kalaallit Nunaat before they can zoom in on what it is specifically that public servants dealing with, e.g., Greenlandic children, need to know and understand in order to fulfil the children's needs.

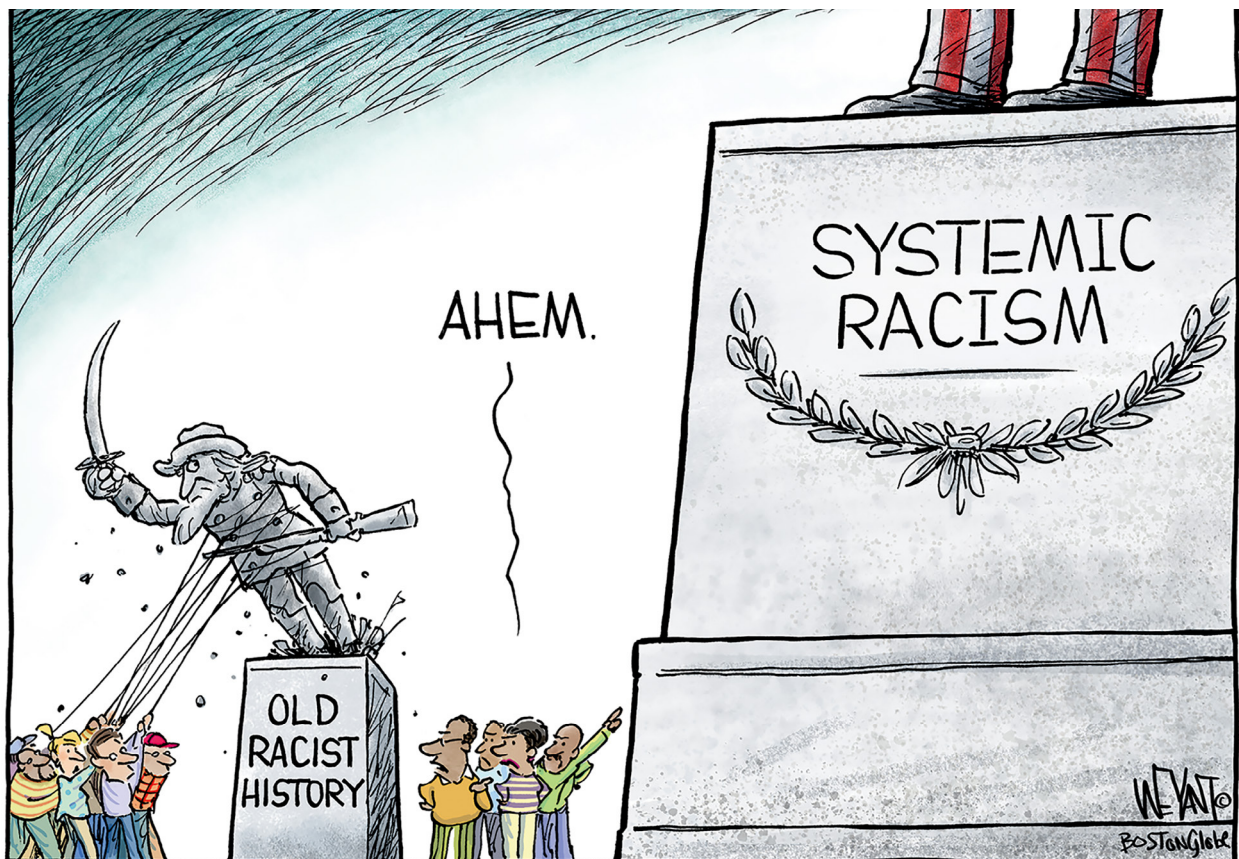
It takes more than that

Is that the solution? To ensure that Danes have knowledge about Kalaallit Nunaat? No, it is not. It is part of the solution. But much more is needed. Is it an impossible task? No, it is not. But it takes time, resources and a long-term effort that focuses on changing structures (legislation, procedures, mechanisms, etc.), actions and attitudes, including prejudices. In the following blog posts, we will dive into how to create systemic changes that strengthen equity and equal treatment. But first, let us take a look at the connection between structural racism today and the historical violations

that characterised the post-colonial era.

Historical offences

In addition to the structural racism we see in Danish society today, there are a number of historical cases of human rights violations for Kalaallit/Inuit, such as 'Greenland's missing children'¹⁰ where hundreds of Greenlandic children were adopted to Denmark until 1976, many of them against their families' will, and the 'IUD case'¹¹ where 4,500 Greenlandic girls and women in the 1960s and 70s had IUDs inserted, many of them without consent. Remarkably similar to cases from other post-colonial contexts, such as Puerto Rico, where women in the 1950s were subjected to medical tests with untested and dangerous contraceptives to stop the population boom that American scientists and politicians believed was caused by women's 'sexual behaviour' and was the root of poverty.¹² Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony for many years, was then conquered by the United States and is today (and in the 1950s) an American state with limited autonomy. In Canada, state-funded religious boarding schools were established from the late 1800s for indigenous children to assimilate them into a European-Canadian culture. They were often located far from their homes so that contact with family could be minimised.¹³ Over an approximately 100-year period, more than 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada were sent to these boarding schools.



Aftermath and truth commissions

Inequity, oppression and racism are the rule rather than the exception in the way European and other countries' colonial masters have acted in the last 100 years. It does not make it any better that there have been violations in other colonial and post-colonial contexts similar to those faced by Kalaallit/Inuit. But importantly, in many of these countries, there has

been an aftermath where the wronged have been heard and some form of justice and reconciliation has been established. Addressing historical offences can be done through trials, such as the one currently underway around the IUD case; through truth commissions, such as the one in Canada between 2007 and 2015; through 'reparations' which is about 'repairing' or compensating for the damage that has

been done; and through measures to ensure that something similar cannot happen in the future.

How such cases are handled in the present affects the future relationship between the former colonial power and the people who suffered the violations. In particular, future-oriented approaches create a link between what can be done to address historical violations and what can be done to change systemic inequity and racism in the present. But historically-oriented truth commissions can also help to create a greater understanding and recognition of the serious violations that have been committed, which is an important, perhaps even necessary, starting point for changing inequity and structural racism in the present and future.

Traces of the past in the present

Can we conclude that the inequity and racism against Kalaallit/Inuit that we see today is a result of historical violations and inequity? We can certainly see that there is a connection between the historical inequity and the social and economic vulnerability that Kalaallit/Inuit experience today, and that vulnerability can then reinforce contemporary stigmatisation and racism. And racism can lead to more inequity because it creates structures and systems that systematically favour one group over another. It is a vicious circle where the different dimensions of inequity reinforce each other.

The Canadian Truth Commission has a call to action,¹⁴ which recognises that the current poor health status of Indigenous peoples in Canada, including Inuit, is a result of past Canadian government policies, including residential schools. They therefore recommend ensuring that Indigenous people in Canada achieve the same health status as other Canadian citizens, which requires a special effort. This is about creating equal opportunities by, among other things, compensating for the inequitable conditions created by historical inequity.

Why is it so important?

In conclusion, it may be relevant to ask ourselves why it is important to change inequity and racism against Kalaallit/Inuit in Denmark. Why should ethnic Danes, all Danes, including politicians, all politicians, take it seriously and invest much more than is currently the case to do something about the problem?

The most obvious answer, of course, is that we must, because anything else would be unfair and will continue to create division and have disastrous consequences for those it affects. Or we must, because otherwise we are not acting in accordance with the human rights conventions to which Denmark is a signatory. Or we must, because it is far too expensive for the Danish state to pay for the maintenance of all those who are not working.^{vii} Perhaps it is also important

because we do not want to be a country and a people that are racist. Because it is not just about the 25 per cent of Danes who think it is okay to speak disparagingly about both Kalaallit/Inuit and other ethnic groups in Denmark.¹⁵ It is about how we as a collective population and through elected politicians and public institutions ensure that all people in Denmark are treated equitably

So, are Danes racist?

No, not all Danes are racist. But all Danes are part of a system that is characterised by historical inequity and persistent structural racism, and if we choose to ignore it and do nothing actively to change it, then yes, I guess you could call us racist.

A particularly skeptical politician might argue that it is not relevant to 'move heaven and earth' to fight inequity and structural racism now that Kalaallit Nunaat will be independent. But on the one hand, that will not happen tomorrow, and on the other hand, there are approximately 17,000 Kalaallit/Inuit who have their home in Denmark, some because they were adopted as children, others because their families are both Greenlandic and Danish, and still others who have taken an education or moved to Denmark with the hope of creating a better life for themselves and their children in the Danish Realm, which on paper offers equal opportunities for everyone.

Change is possible

Regardless of what we use as an argument, we must now do everything we can to correct the systemic inequity and racism that many Kalaallit/Inuit face in Denmark. There are already many Greenlandic activists and organisations doing great work to fight inequity, but they need much more support, and we ethnic Danes also need to get much more involved in the fight.

One sign of success is that last week a political agreement was made to remove the parental competency tests that have caused the forced removal of too many Greenlandic children from their parents. They succeeded because skilled Greenlandic lawyers and activists have been fighting for this for several years; because other Greenlandic organisations have pushed for it in the municipalities; because they had organisations like the Danish Institute for Human Rights work with them to document the problem; because the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples has pointed it out to the Danish government; and because the Greenlandic members of parliament have been effective and persistent in their political work. It was not Trump's doing, even though he was the one in the media spotlight. It was Kalaallit/Inuit themselves who led the fight and achieved the result.

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Notes

ⁱ Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) is one of the few organisations globally whose primary purpose is to promote systems change that creates equity and equality in the international development and peacebuilding system. Over eight years, we have built knowledge about structural inequality and developed methodological approaches to systems change (see for example. [Systems Change is Driven by People](#) (2022), [Chain of Influence Framework for Systems Change](#) (2022) and [The Dragonfly Model](#) (2021)). We want to make this knowledge useful in the Danish post-colonial reality, where there is a great need for innovation and change.

ⁱⁱ The word "Inuit" means "people" or "peoples" in several Inuit languages, most notably Inuktitut, which is spoken in Canada and parts of Greenland. "Inuit" is used as a collective term for the indigenous peoples of the Arctic regions, including Canada, Alaska and Greenland. In contrast, the word "Kalaallit" translates to "Greenlander" and only covers those who come from Greenland. There is resistance among some Kalaallit/Inuit to using the term 'Kalaallit' as they believe it refers to land boundaries determined by colonial powers. The term 'Greenlander' is typically used by those who are old enough to have lived most of their lives in a time when these terms were not problematised.

ⁱⁱⁱ We use the term 'structural racism' in the sense that it is discrimination against one or more ethnic groups in society that occurs when unconscious beliefs and societal structures act as barriers to these groups' equal access to, for example, education, health and political participation.

^{iv} The protection of minorities is part of international human rights work and aims to protect linguistic, ethnic, religious and national minorities from majority rule and to preserve their distinctive culture and language. Rules to this effect can be found in the 1966 UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the 1995 European Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, among others.

^v With the Greenland Commission of 1950 and the Greenland Committee of 1960 (known as the G50 and G60 policies) and the constitutional amendment in 1953, which changed Greenland from a Danish colony to a Danish county, major upheavals occurred in Greenlandic society and in the Danish-Greenlandic relationship as a result of modernisation and 'danification' of society, such as the introduction of Danish as the main language in schools and sending Greenlandic children to spend years in Denmark as part of a linguistic and cultural education. A report written by the Reconciliation Commission states that in 2003 there were approximately 28% Greenlandic-speaking, 62% bilingual and 10% Danish-speaking Kalaallit/Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat.

^{vi} As far as we know, there are no statistics on how many Kalaallit/Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat speak Danish but not Greenlandic and how many speak Greenlandic but not Danish. An article on DR.dk cites the figures we refer to in this article, which are also used as a reference elsewhere. The article states that it is based on a 'conservative estimate from the Greenlandic Language Board'.¹⁶ A report written by the Reconciliation Commission states that in 2003 there were approximately 28% Greenlandic-speaking, approximately 62% bilingual and approximately 10% Danish-speaking Kalaallit/Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat.¹⁷

^{vii} A study conducted by VIVE in 2018 shows that employment among adult Greenlanders living in Denmark is significantly lower than for the rest of the Danish population. For people from Greenland aged 25-50, 33.1 per cent were in employment in 2016, compared to 76.2 per cent among people of the same age in the rest of the Danish population (VIVE, 2018).¹⁸

Litterature

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