The first, and possibly the most important, confrontation I had was with biologism. In 1960, when I completed secondary school in Denmark, year 10 was still divided into mathematics for the boys and what was commonly called “girls’ arithmetic.” After all, girls had not been naturally blessed with mathematical abilities, it was thought, and, consequently, there were very few girls in the mathematics class at upper secondary school. Girls were going to work in shops or to sit in offices until they got married, so what they needed was mental arithmetic.

“See for yourself – there are no female violin virtuosos, no female inventors, no female grandmasters, and no female professors of philosophy or mathematics!” When the boys put forward arguments like these, as they frequently did, it was hard to take. The worst of all, however, was when one of my best female friends at upper secondary school said to me: “You might as well stop protesting, because men are actually superior to women.”

Today we have the violinist Ann-Sofie Mutter; there are female conductors and grandmasters, female professors of mathematics and philosophy, female prime ministers, governors of national banks, astronauts, pilots, officers, jazz pianists, and female radio and TV newsreaders. And there are just as many girls as there are boys studying mathematics. This is nothing short of a cultural revolution, and it is exciting to have experienced and been actively involved in this transformation.

The confrontation with biologism was an important item on the agenda of the women’s movement even in its infancy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The confrontation has had different perspectives over the years, but it has always been necessary because biological arguments have forever been used to oppress women. Taking this confrontation a few steps further was taken for granted by women’s
studies as it began to emerge throughout the world in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently it is incorrect to claim that the confrontation with biologism – or with “essentialism” to use an unclear modern term – came at a later stage with post-structuralism.

When I was young, I avidly read Simone de Beauvoir’s and Asta Ekenvall’s criticism of the gender-coded dichotomies in Western thought: sun/moon, light/dark, culture/nature, strong/weak, active/passive and man/woman (Beauvoir 1949; Ekenvall 1966). However, the greatest source of inspiration for my rebellion was without doubt my own mother, Elin Høgsbro Appel, who on her mother’s side (Høgsbro) and her father’s (Appel) was descended from well-known figures in the Danish folk high-school movement and politicians.

**Daring to be different**

When my mother was elected to the Folketing, the second chamber of the Danish parliament, in 1945 as a member of the major liberal party, Venstre, her father was already there. They were the first-ever father and daughter to sit in the Danish parliament. She was also the first mother of small children to sit in the parliament, and I, the youngest of three, was only a baby when she was elected. My father was the principal of Vestbirk Højskole, a Grundtvigian folk high school, in East Jutland in Denmark, and he – assisted by nursemaids, of course – looked after us children during the week while my mother was in the parliament in Copenhagen.

Self-confidence and a belief in the equal abilities of women and men are something I grew up with. My mother became a radical feminist long before it was fashionable. After an unhappy love affair with a leading politician, and a divorce from my father, painful for all involved, she changed course. From a Christian, liberal politician and a folk high-school teacher, she became an atheist, a culturally radical feminist, and an upper secondary schoolteacher in a suburb of Copenhagen. She was inspiring but not always easy to get on with.

I was four or five when my parents divorced. Divorces were unusual at the time, with the consequence also being that my mother lost her seat in the parliament and my father was dismissed from his job at the folk high school. As a result I grew up with my mother and my two older sisters in a home where, with no man in the family, we had to learn to do everything ourselves. In our street, we were the only home without a father and without a mother who was a housewife. However, we were proud of being different.