



A brand of one's own: how Denmark's women are redrawing fashion's rules



In an industry dominated by male creative directors, a quiet shift is taking place in Copenhagen, where women are not only leading labels but redefining what success looks like



Chloe Mac Donnell Fri 8 Aug 2025 08.01 CEST Last modified on Fri 8 Aug 2025 08.02 CEST Share

Football fans will be familiar with the manager musical chairs, but fashion has been strangely similar over the last year. Since mid-2024 there have been 17 new designers appointed to head up houses including Gucci and Dior. But, in an industry fuelled by womenswear, just four of these appointments have been women.

And there are other depressing statistics. Of the top 30 luxury brands in the Vogue Business Index, a mere five creative directors are women. At Kering, the luxury conglomerate that owns Balenciaga and Valentino, there is just one: Louise Trotter at Bottega Veneta. At LVMH, the fashion behemoth that counts Loewe and Dior among its brands, again, just one label is helmed by a woman – Sarah Burton at Givenchy.

There's more. In February, research by 1Granary found that 74% of students at top fashion programmes are female, yet 88% of fashion's top designer roles are held by men. The last time a woman won designer of the year at the Fashion awards was in 2012. And it's not just designers. The majority of those in positions of power at brands, such as CEOs and executives, are also male.

There is an anomaly, though. This week, the 19th iteration of Copenhagen fashion week (CPHFW), known in the industry as the fifth fashion week, is being held in the Danish capital. Of the 42 brands participating, 26 are founded and led by females.

Stine Goya – who now sells her eponymous label in over 30 countries, with the US being its second-biggest market outside Denmark – describes men's continual domination of the fashion industry as “outdated”. Denmark's structural approach to equality, she says, has become a key instigator of change, with policies aimed at improving wage equality and schemes to encourage women to return to work after having children. “Copenhagen has become an ecosystem for independent female-led brands,” she told me. “There is a spirit of collaboration here, and a willingness to do things differently. It has allowed women to take up space and build businesses on their own terms.”





A look from Cecilie Bahnsen's spring/summer '26 show Photograph: James Cochrane/PR IMAGE

Stephanie Gundelach co-founded OpéraSport, a brand that specialises in creating contemporary wardrobe staples from upcycled materials, with Awa Malina Stelter in 2019. Gundelach says much of their motivation comes from the desire to overcome this type of gender inequality. "There is an unspoken bias in the fashion industry where often women have to work twice as hard to be seen as equally visionary. In Copenhagen, there is a shift happening. Women are building their own platforms rather than waiting for a seat at someone else's table."

Fashion's idea of what a woman should look like impacts everything, from the models who appear on the catwalks to the design of the clothes. In 2024, for instance, 1.4% of models on the catwalks at CPHFW were plus-size while in New York, London, Milan and Paris just 0.8% of models were plus-size.

Cecilie Bahnsen, who popularised the idea of wearing intricate and romantic dresses



with practical trainers, says that as a woman designing for other women her ethos is based around comfort. "There is an ease to my pieces. They don't outshine you."

"A lot of women want to wear something different to what male designers suggest they should wear," says Anne Sofie Madsen, who this week relaunched her namesake brand with a new co-creative director, the stylist Caroline Clante. "We look at clothing with a female gaze. Our customers are not only dressing to be desired or admired, but also to be themselves." This season's collection included a pair of "evening jeans", as well as meme-able "rat bags".

While the creative jobs at the top of the fashion industry have become synonymous with burnout, Danish designers take a more holistic approach to work-life balance, in line with Danish work culture generally. Madsen, who prior to launching her own label in 2011 worked alongside designers including Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, credits fashion's traditional gauntlet of endless travelling, long hours and expectations to produce more than six collections a year as a catalyst for her hitting pause on her brand in 2017. "I realised that I was living a life that I didn't want to live," she says. "I wanted to figure out a different way to be in fashion."



Making their own path ... Awa Malina Stelter and Stephanie Gundelach at a Copenhagen fashion week event. Photograph: Martin Sylvest Andersen/Getty Images for Dazed

Now, Madsen and Clante are determined to build their brand to work around their lives, rather than making the brand their whole existence. Madsen is continuing to teach at the Scandinavian Academy of Fashion Design and Clante works as a freelance stylist.

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Bahnsen, who started showing in Paris in 2022, has kept her atelier based in Copenhagen, describing it as “her bubble”. She allows her team of 26 women and four men to work flexible hours and discourages working at weekends. Gundelach and Stelter will often finish work at 3pm in order to spend time with their families, and Bahnsen’s five-year-old son is a regular sight in her atelier. Livia Schück, co-founder of Rave Review – who this season showed delicate boho-inspired dresses and skirts made from deadstock – took her post-show bow while holding her five-month-old daughter.

“We don’t have a culture where you need to stay until five or six because that’s not workable when you have small kids,” says Stelter. “Our workers know what we expect of them, but they have the freedom to work flexibly. As long as the work is getting done we are happy.”

Many Danes talk about the “law of Jante”, a sort of Scandinavian social code based on the idea that no one is better than anyone else. Gundelach describes how it feeds into “a collaborative rather than competitive energy” and says that “there is a strong community of female creatives lifting each other up, which I feel is quite rare”.

Goya credits “a sense of openness” and an “ambitious creative scene” as a driving force for independent female designers. “It’s not been about having an ego. It is about building a team, a brand and a community.”

As Isabella Rose Davey, chief operating officer of CPHFW, points out, the women paving a new path in the industry hope that others will follow their lead. “It is modern, forward thinking like this that we need to see more of outside Denmark to ensure that women are not locked out of senior positions.”

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