

DET, VI OVERSER. Der er noget talent, vi ikke har fået øje på i Danmark. Det er et af budskaberne fra kvinderne i ProWoc – Professional Women of Colour in Denmark. De fortæller om at måtte arbejde hårdere for at blive hørt og få jobbene og forfremmelserne. Om at blive bedt om at fikse kaffemaskinen. Og om at løfte hinanden i et "fantastisk, men meget homogent land."



THE THINGS WE OVERLOOK.

There is some talent that we do not notice in Denmark. That is one of the messages from the women of ProWoc - Professional Women of Colour in Denmark. They talk about having to work harder to be heard, to get jobs, and to be promoted. About being asked to fix the coffee machines. And about uplifting each other in a "fantastic but very homogenous country".



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1. Caroline Onyango-Dyregaard hev fat i os sidste år, da hun havde læst et interview med sin hollandske Mærsk-kollega, Iris Kleine-korte, om arbejdslivet som expat i Danmark. Måske lå der noget interessant i Carolines erfaringer og de kampe, hun har skullet kæmpe som sort kvinde på det danske arbejdsmarked? Det gjorde der. **Læs selv på side 20**, hvor du kan møde Caroline og fem andre fra netværket ProWoc – Professional Women of Colour in Denmark.

Contributors. *1. Caroline Onyango-Dyregaard contacted us last year when she read an interview about her Dutch Maersk Colleague, Iris Kleine, about her experiences working as an EXPAT in Denmark. Maybe there was something interesting in Caroline's experiences and the fights she has to take on as a black woman in the Danish workplace? Yes, there was. **Read it for yourself on page 20**, where you can meet Caroline and five others from the ProWoc Network - Professional Women of Colour in Denmark.*

Hey, vi er lige her



I netværket ProWoc – Professional Women of Colour in Denmark fortæller de om at arbejde hårdere for at få jobbene. Om at blive bedt om at fikse kaffemaskinen. Og om at løfte hinanden i et "fantastisk, men meget homogent land." »

HEY, we are right here

In the network ProWoc - Professional Women of Colour in Denmark, they talk about having to work harder to get jobs. About being asked to fix the coffee machines. And about uplifting each other in a "fantastic but very homogenous country".

Article text

In fact, the network ProWoc - Professional Women of Colour in Denmark - should have met one evening in December at Hotel D'Angleterre in Copenhagen for an event with the Head of HR at A.P. Møller Holding, Maria Pejter, on what it takes to be successful in business.

It was at D'Angleterre, because the network has a sponsor who has donated a meeting room to them at the hotel for a number of events. Who the sponsor is, we will return to.

Instead, it is a Zoom event, like so much else in December.

The women in the network are highly educated, have important jobs and are ambitious. For example, the lawyer Caroline Onyango-Dyregaard, who is a Legal Counsel in Maersk, is Kenyan-American, studied law at Ohio State University in the USA and got her law degree in Washington D.C.

But success is not a given for women of colour in Denmark.

"Although there are several networks for highly educated women in Denmark - myself being a member of one of them - there is a need for a network for us with what in English is called "shared experiences" says ProWoc's chairman and co-founder, Phaedria Marie St. Hilaire. She is from Dominica, has a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Duke University in the USA and is a Science Business Leader in Novo Nordisk.

"Denmark is a fantastic country - and it is very homogeneous. However, we must not hide the realities. As minority women, we must work harder than so many others to be heard and to get the jobs and promotions."

But ProWoc is not a club for complaining. It is a sanctuary. A safe space. Where those who have been successful provide positive energy, support and resources to those who are fighting for it.

"We lift each other up. We do not sit and wait to receive something as a gift. We are honest and realistic about what it takes," says Selim Ablo-Nielsen, lawyer and co-founder of the network.

Positive energy

Selim Ablo-Nielsen is Ghanaian, who studied Law at The George Washington University Law School, became a lawyer in New York and is a Senior Compliance Counselor in Novo Nordisk. She was a lawyer in Philadelphia, USA, when she met her Danish husband. She loved Denmark from the times she visited and even before the couple decided to settle here in 2008. "I was sure I would get off to a flying start. I was sure I could easily get a job in a law firm or as a corporate lawyer." But it took a long time.



"At the time, I did not speak Danish, and that was part of the explanation. But not the entire explanation," she says.

"I lacked a strong professional network to support my career development, and that also understood the challenges that immigrants and minority women sometimes face. I longed to see more minority women in business and in public."

Eventually, she got a job at the law firm Delacour Dania and then at Novo Nordisk.

But she still looked around and asked: "Where were the other women like me?" She knew what it cost emotionally when she looked at it from the outside in. She felt it was not enough to have been successful herself and decided to form a network. She reached out to friends and contacts on LinkedIn, and invited them to a kick-off meeting in March 2019. Fifteen women showed up and put in energy, ideas and hard work. One of them was Phaedria Marie St. Hilaire, who was already a mentor for newcomers to Denmark and for her colleagues.

"Many have believed in me and supported me in my career. Therefore, it was time to give something back to others," says Phaedria.

The word spread. Headhunter, Belinda Bramsnæs, who wrote the book 'The headhunter's guide to the good CV', came on board as a CV coach. In August, ProWoc's website was

launched by one of the network's members, Sondra Duckert. And now they have 150 on the mailing list.

"I have lived in Denmark for 25 years. I had no idea that there were so many professional women of colour," says Phaedria.

Need more inclusion

Do you actually experience discrimination and exclusion because of your skin colour?

"Sometimes, yes," says Selim, who believes there are two factors at stake.

"One is being an outsider. It doesn't matter if you are black, yellow or white. When you move to a new country, you are an outsider. New language, new culture, new network."

The other is the homogeneous Danish job market.

"There is a need for greater diversity. ProWoc helps to point out: 'Hey, there is some talent out here'. Danish companies should make an extra effort to include other cultures and backgrounds."

"The short answer is yes," says Phaedria. It's sad, but the truth. She is part of a Facebook group where almost every week someone shares experiences of discrimination and marginalization. For example, "You're the boss and go into a meeting room. The other meeting participants think it's your white colleague who is the boss. Or you are asked to fix the coffee machine because someone thinks you belong to the housekeeping staff. I also hear more serious things like women who say they have been told they cannot be the front person in this consulting firm - for the sake of the customers."

In ProWoc, they talk about how to make yourself resilient and not let yourself be knocked out by those kinds of experiences.

Selim points to the unconscious biases of exclusion. It is always easiest to go to someone that speaks the same language, has gone to the same schools and has the same network as oneself.

"I hope ProWoc can encourage everyone to step out of their comfort zone and talk to someone who is not exactly like themselves. There is a need for companies to have a greater understanding of what real inclusion means."

HR Manager: Diversity is good business

At the Zoom meeting in December, Maria Pejter, the Head of HR at A.P. Møller Holding said: "Diversity and inclusion is just good business for companies. But diversity without inclusion is hollow. If you hire with diversity in mind and then expect everyone to behave as if they were born, educated and have lived their whole lives in Denmark, then it will not work. Then, you won't get the benefits that diversity provides."

And who has sponsored a conference room at D'Angleterre? It is Yvonne Seier Christensen, co-founder of the online bank Saxo Bank and a big fan of ProWoc's purpose.

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