

Editorial

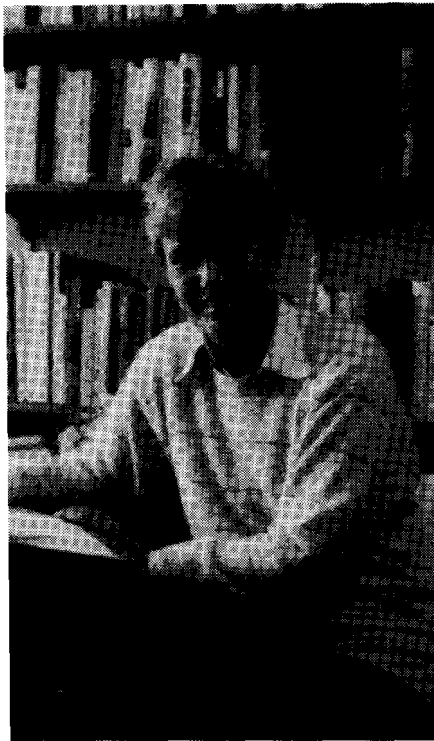
by *Varpu Lindström-Best*

For over a century, many North American feminists have cast envious glances towards the women of Nordic countries — Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. They have highlighted some of the spectacular successes that Scandinavian* women have achieved in their quest for equality. These nations have often been identified by the women's movement as models for future progress.

Indeed, the Scandinavians have much to be proud of. For example, the percentage of women who take part in the public system of decision making is the highest in the world. About a third of the members of parliament and many ministers are women. The President of Iceland is a woman as is the Prime Minister of Norway. Similarly, women's participation in the workforce surpasses that of any other Western country. Gender equality principles and objectives are clearly established in and protected by the legal system as well as by collective agreements. The latter fact is significant as some 80-90% of the workers in Scandinavia belong to trade unions.

Although Sweden, Norway and Denmark are constitutional monarchies and Finland and Iceland are republics, all five countries share a long history of commitment to democracy. Since the turn of the century, they have been influenced by social democratic ideology and have developed advanced welfare legislation. Hence, Scandinavian women can benefit from excellent, free health care (maternity clinics, progressive abortion laws, etc.). They have, relatively speaking, good access to professional daycare facilities and have won guarantees of universal daycare by the early nineties. Furthermore, pension issues and their care of elderly women make our North American legislation seem insensitive.

In this issue of *CWS/cf*, scholars, journalists, artists and poets from Scandinavia and Canada explore the past and present position of women in Nordic countries. They urge us to look beyond the impressive list of "firsts" and the fast developing myth of equality in Scandinavia. They



*Varpu Lindström-Best is an Assistant Professor of History & Co-ordinator of Canadian Studies at Atkinson College, York University. Her most recent publication is **Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada (Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988).***

reveal that women in Scandinavia do not march "side by side" with the men and that "feminism" is usually a dirty word.

Gender differentiation in the educational system continues to thrive. Sex segregation in employment is staggering and, except in Finland, Scandinavian women are likely to work part-time. On average, they still earn only about 80% of men's salaries. Change has been painstakingly slow. Some blame the strength of tradition and the state Lutheran churches, others point to the cumbersome bureaucracy which has been the by-product of the welfare state and has entrenched male dominance within its structural hierarchy. Yet others note the complacency of some Scandinavian women who are satisfied to admire their past achievements. Modern North American radical feminism is hard pressed to find a counterpart in Scandinavia.

By describing the reality of women's lives in Scandinavia, this issue hopes to spark an exchange of ideas between those North Americans and Scandinavians dedicated to the advancement of women. The two have much to give to each other. Included in the journal are a selection of interviews and poems which concentrate on Scandinavian-Canadian women and their organizations. In the book review section, a special effort has been made to incorporate many recent books which relate to Nordic women. Much of the poetry has been translated specifically for this issue and is, therefore, available to the English-speaking reader for the first time.

I wish to thank the editorial board of the *CWS/cf* for this opportunity to discuss and correspond with so many inspiring contributors. I am grateful for all the assistance of the women who dedicate their time to *CWS/cf* and I admire the exceptional spirit of voluntarism that engulfs this journal. Finally, I extend special thanks to two fine scholars and friends who devoted much time and energy to this project. Seija Paddon not only wrote the intriguing article and found the historic photographs on Lapp women which begin this issue, but also translated much of the poetry and some articles from Finland. The selection of art and the decision to emphasize Outi Heiskanen, Finland's artist of the year in 1986, was made by Annu Mallinick. Her choice illuminates beautifully the spirit of this issue. Outi Heiskanen paints, performs and writes for "every woman." Her explorations to restructure society, to invent new family forms through her "House of Cards" implores us to stop and think of the real position of women in Scandinavia. The cover page is but one depiction from the "House of Cards" which speaks not only for the fragility but also for the malleability of social structures. The contributors to this journal share Outi Heiskanen's critical optimism:

The tragedy in this game...is hidden elsewhere, not in the disintegration.

The sorrow is not the fragility. Taking apart is here a part of putting together.

*Strictly speaking, Finland and Iceland are situated beyond the geographic boundaries of the Scandinavian peninsula but, in general usage, Scandinavian and Nordic countries are synonymous.