

Women Active Participants in the Politics of Finland — Yet Problems Remain

by Arja Alho, M.P.

Both Finnish men and women were granted universal and equal suffrage in 1906. Hence, Finnish women were the first in the world to have an unconditional and unrestricted right to vote for members of parliament. They did not, however, gain the right to vote in municipal elections until 1917. This development contrasted sharply with women in other Scandinavian countries where they first voted for local government and only later for the parliament.

The proportion of women in Finland's parliament has risen steadily. In the first election of Independent Finland in 1919, 17 of the 200 members of parliament were women making up 9% of the total. Before Finland's independence from Russia in 1917, there were even more women in the parliament. In the 1987 elections, 62 women (31%) were elected. Women are, therefore, strongly represented in the decision making of the country, yet many problems remain.

Women's Voting Behaviour

During the early years of Finnish independence women did not vote as frequently as men, but since the 1930s no significant difference has been noted in men's and women's voting behaviour. Of both sexes, 80-95% of the eligible voters cast their ballot. Some studies conducted in the sixties did indicate, however, that women's active interest in politics was less than that of men. According to these studies the most passive group of voters was the housewives who sometimes did not vote at all, or voted according to their husband's political beliefs. This is no longer the case, women in Finland now make their selection quite independently from their spouses or families.

Despite the fact that the women in Finland were able to sit in the parliament they were not freed from their husband's guardianship until 1930. Since then the legal equality of the sexes has been achieved

and official equal rights legislation was passed in 1986.

In the Finnish election procedure nominees are chosen by each political party or by nominating committees. Finland does

not have a system of party lists where nominees are ranked as is the custom in other Scandinavian countries. This partially explains the success of Finnish women in the parliamentary elections: it



Arja Alho.

Photo: Sosialidemokraattinen, Eduskuntaryhmä

is possible to vote specifically for a female candidate.

Who Votes for Women?

Research indicates that in Finland women vote for women. Female candidates have their greatest support from the younger voters. The large urban centres elect more women than the rural areas and women usually represent the major parties. The most typical supporter of women candidates is a 39-45 year old woman who is fully employed and who casts her ballot for either the Social Democrats or the

Conservatives. Studies also indicate that the middle-class man feels most threatened by women's political activity.

Women & Political Parties in Finland

The position of women within the party has not improved as much as in the parliament. There are fewer female members within the political parties and women attend political meetings less frequently than men. When they do they are less likely to speak up. Women believe that the party structure and recruitment process, and political ideology have dis-

criminated against them. Information about political questions is usually channelled along routes more accessible to men. The language of politics is masculine and further alienates women.

Simply stated, it is clear that the number of women is always greater in openly and democratically elected positions. Women are less likely to be on appointed committees, or involved in any of the decisions made by small groups "behind the scenes."

Women Members of Parliament and their Relationship to the Women's Movement

Without exception all women members of parliament have been involved in some organization prior to their election. Women MPs also tend to have belonged to their political party longer than the men. When women are elected to the parliament they experience a decline in their other organized activity — men, however, find that their number of memberships in organizations increases. Men are more likely to be appointed to sit on various boards of directors, governing bodies and committees. This factor is important in their ability to raise funds for campaigning.

Today we can state that all 62 women in the parliament of Finland share a common female consciousness. They all maintain close links to their women's organizations. A vast majority of the women MPs value the support that they receive from their own party's women's organizations. It should be noted, however, that the women Members of Parliament are not well acquainted with the literature on the women's movement or on feminist activity. Many political women believe that feminism is a negative concept which connotes aggressiveness, is self-congratulatory and promotes the myth of the womb. The women's political organizations do not claim to be feminist organizations but rather opportunities for women to work together.

Legislative Working Days

The traditional division of male and female work is also evident in the Finnish legislative process. Proportionately women Members of Parliament are most represented in committees discussing health, education, social issues, culture



Miina Sillanpää, 1920-luvulla.

Photo: Sosialidemokraattinen, Eduskuntaryhmä.

and family law. Women are underrepresented in budget, forestry, agriculture, transportation and defence committees. This is despite the fact that the majority of women MPs have indicated their desire to serve on the male-dominated committees. The first female Minister was Miina Sillanpää who held the portfolio of Social Affairs from 1926-27. She was first elected to the parliament in 1907 and was a vocal advocate of women's issues. Lucina Hagman was the first chair of a parliamentary committee in 1917 when she was in charge of education. The first Speaker of the House, Anna-Liisa Linkola, was not appointed until 1975.

Studies of female parliamentarians demonstrate that women are more motivated in their political work. The extra effort does not, however, translate into publicity. The media invariably chooses to interview men about the "hot issues" in parliament, because men hold the formal positions. Women parliamentarians are interviewed about their choice of clothing or the method of diet they use. It is a real concern for Finnish women parliamentarians that they are not recognized by the media for their political activity.

Much of the work conducted in parliament is done within the many political parties, and joint projects are not common. Women MPs are quite open to crossing the party lines and co-operating with other parties, although to date efforts in this direction have been few. Possibilities mentioned by the women for such multi-party co-operation include daycare, other socio-political questions, peace and foreign aid.

Daycare

The issue of daycare has seen considerable debate in the parliament of Finland. Political differences clearly emerge. The Conservative women MPs stress the need to have daycare or babysitting expenses tax deductible, while the left-wing argues for the building of daycare centres and improving home daycare systems. Finland has passed legislation that all children under the age of 3 must have an available space in the municipal daycare centres within the next few years. Because the percentage of women who work full-time in Finland is the highest in the Western world, the issue of daycare has been a major concern for the Finnish

women's movement and the women parliamentarians.

How do Women Change in the Parliament?

The political parties in Finland have faced a lot of criticism. It is argued that they have lost touch with everyday life, and that their language has become too difficult to understand. In this climate of criticism, much has been expected from the women. Have the women, who are so well represented in the parliament and in municipal governments, risen to the challenge?

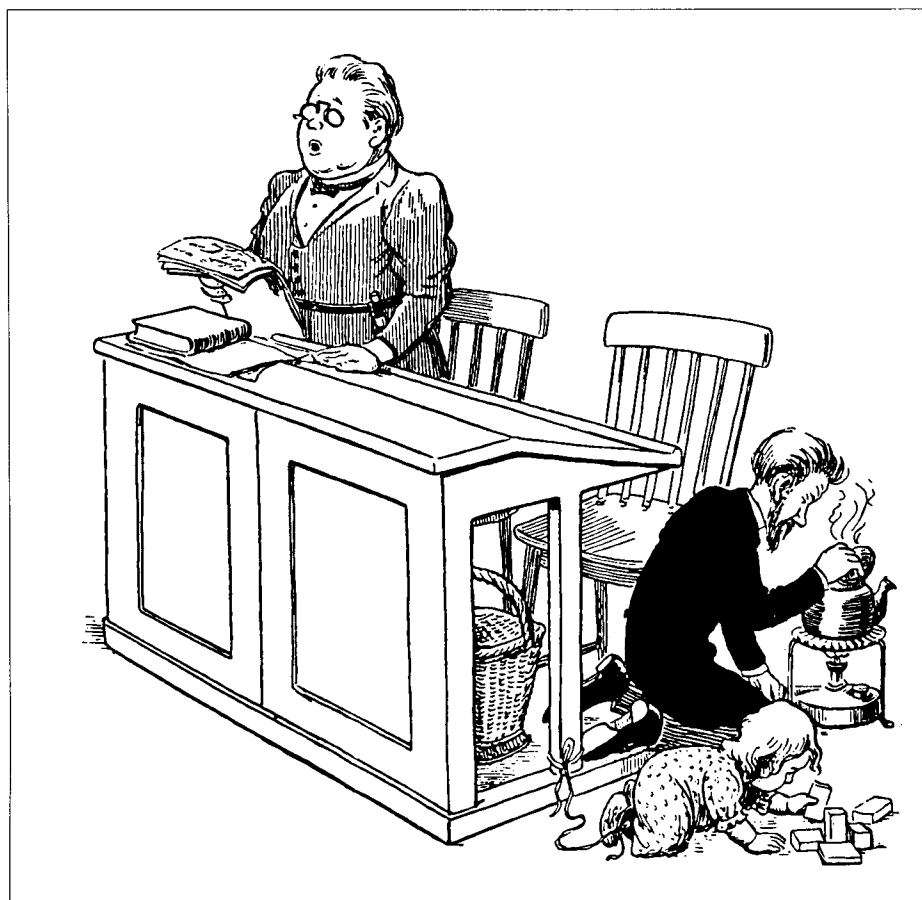
In my own ongoing study I have tried to examine the effects of the combination of women's emancipation and political power. In general terms, Finnish political structures have developed in such a way as to make it difficult to distinguish the factors blocking women's advancement. Women as political decision makers are prisoners of the political culture.

A central question is how to improve our knowledge of power structures and of the unofficial but influential networking.

Research on women is not helpful in this regard. Even in politics there is the problem that women are satisfied to be "the first or the only one." It is certain however, that the more women are elected, the more necessary changes in the conducting of politics will become.

Women in Finland are conquering political parties. They are thinking about political realignments and future trends which will further empower them in their political parties. The more women politicians are able to combine their power with a feminist consciousness, the more they will be able to make their mark on the political culture.

Arja Alho has been a Member of Parliament in Finland since 1983 and represents the Social Democratic Party. Prior to her election to the parliament she had already served in the Helsinki City Council and was Chair of the Student Union of nurses. This article is based on her graduate research at the University of Helsinki. Arja Alho is well known in Finland for her promotion and support of women's issues in the parliament.



"The Whole Family in a New Parliament." Cartoon of Miina Sillanpää published in 1906 when Finnish women won the right to vote.