

Women's Associations in Finland: Links between the Welfare State & Feminism

by Ellen Marakowitz

Collective struggles have long been a part of Finland's history, and the women's movement is no exception. Beginning in the late 19th century, a combination of women's groups fought the struggle to gain the vote for women. This struggle marked the first time women used their strength through organizations to affect a basic social structure. In the battle for this critical right, women skillfully used political and tactical tools to their advantage. Women had definitely stepped out of the domestic arena and into the public realm. This article discusses some of the women's organizations that were and are still instrumental to an analysis of women's position and power in Finland today.

Distinctions between public and private spheres have been widely utilized in cross-cultural studies of the position of women. All too often in the analysis of women's power there is a tendency to view as almost "natural" a division of women's and men's activities into private (female) and public (male) spheres. The justification for this is usually rooted in women's role in reproduction and lactation. As the locus of power is generally assumed to reside in the public sphere, women, by virtue of their homebound or "homeward looking" viewpoint, are considered to have little power except for indirect influence filtered from the home to the public arena, usually through a male family member.

Finland illustrates clearly, however, that the above argument contains some serious flaws. Firstly, in Finland one finds a highly developed welfare state, which affords women greater latitude in arranging social patterns. Although it still appears to be the case, unfortunately, that women bear the final responsibility for children, there has been an attempt to redress the situation through legislation. *The Child Day Care Act*, enacted in 1973, calls for all municipalities to provide child care as need demands. Despite problems with policy implementation (in 1980 only 50% of child care needs were met by the

state and the situation hasn't improved greatly), social policy is directed towards easing women's domestic responsibilities and freeing them to work outside of the home, whether out of choice or necessity.

State intervention plays an extensive role in other areas of social welfare, and as women are clients or recipients of social welfare to a greater extent than men, women's dependence on state policy becomes stronger. Not surprisingly, though, women's interest in developing and shaping social welfare policies is also strengthened. The nuances between private welfare concerns and public policy are thus strongly inter-connected through women's interests.

Secondly, the broad strokes of public/private fail to take into account the large numbers of women active outside the home. In 1986 women in Finland made up 47% of the workforce, with 70% of working age women engaged in paid employment. Women in Finland have a high level of participation in traditional politics, both within political parties and as elected and appointed officials at local and national levels. Of the current parliament, approximately one third consists of women. There is still a third area where women are found active outside the home and this is in women's voluntary associations. These associations have long played an important role in Finland as vehicles to improve women's position in the home and workplace as well as being a means through which women can gain personal support and contact with issues of concern to them.

This article focuses on this realm of activities outside the home, namely women's voluntary associations. How have these organizations been used as a tool of women's power? What is the relationship between these groups and the welfare state? And finally, by looking at these organizations can one find any pattern between the welfare state and new and old wave feminism in contemporary

Finland? Old wave feminism is connected with the first wave of the women's rights movement, where equality of opportunity was stressed. New wave feminism goes beyond equality of opportunity to demand equality of result, which entails an analysis of the causes of women's oppression.

The associations considered below are unique in that the majority, if not all, of the members are women. For a variety of reasons, be it common interest or ideology, these women decided that it was necessary to organize together as an essentially all-women group. This article, despite the fact that in Finland women are very active in women's sections of political parties and trade unions, is directed only to those groups which are independent and not incorporated into a larger organization.

Women's associations in Finland stretch across ideological, professional and political lines. Some associations have a politically oriented focus while others are more concerned with practical issues, particularly as linked to the home and family. Some groups radically challenge the social structure, such as lesbian-feminist or anarchist groups, while others attempt to uphold such "traditional" values as patriotism and religious faith. Out of this spectrum of organizations it is most illustrative to choose two of the oldest groups for closer examination. The two groups are the Martha Group (*Marttaliitto*) and the Women's Union (*Naisasiainliitto Unioni*). Both groups sought to improve women's position but in very different ways.

By examining these two groups which have a long history in Finland some connections can be seen between these groups, the welfare state and feminism in Finland. Both groups were founded towards the end of the 19th century, in a political atmosphere of growing Finnish national identity, as Finland was chafing in its semi-autonomous status as a Grand Duchy of Tsarist Russia. Part of the independence movement involved a call for improved

standards and living conditions for the Finnish populace. The Martha Group, with its focus on practical education and homemaking skills may be seen as being rooted in this improvement of living standards strain of the nationalist movement. The Women's Union on the other hand, emphasized the emancipation of women, focussing on women's suffrage and expanding opportunities for women outside the home, and in this way was linked to the aspect of the nationalist movement that stressed independence and full rights for Finnish citizens. As at their inception, and still today, both groups consider themselves totally independent of any political affiliations.

When the groups were still young each experienced early success. The Martha Group's activities were directed at both rural as well as urban families, although it was concentrated in rural work, which is not surprising given that extensive urbanization did not come to Finland until after the Second World War. The group's extension courses were so successful that in 1907 the Martha Group began to receive a state subsidy to cover half of the expenses of the education. At this point one can see the beginning of the relationship between the Martha Group and the early stages of the welfare state.

Although not single-handedly, the work of the Women's Union was instrumental in securing the right to vote for women. Their success was so great that Finland was the first European country to achieve women's suffrage, in 1906. University education was also made open to women in 1905; accessibility to higher education for women had been another priority on the Union's agenda.

The fate of both groups following these early successes is illustrative of the link between welfare state policies and feminism, in both its first and second waves.

With the Martha Group having achieved financial stability and support through its subsidy link to the government as well as its growing base of local chapters, its membership and activities continued to expand. The Martha Group's founding principles stressed religion as a basic building block of society, as well as complementary but equal roles for men and women. The goal was not to expand women's opportunities outside of the home, but to improve the skills of home-making, and accordingly increase the value

and role of the housewife.

Childcare, health and nutrition, living conditions, physical fitness — the Martha Group directs attention to all these issues, which, not surprisingly, are essentially the same concerns addressed by the welfare state. There is nothing threatening about these issues in this form: they are simply in support of human development and betterment. The activities of the Martha Group and social welfare policy develop hand in hand. There is a relationship, perhaps unacknowledged, between public policy and the Martha Group as evidenced through substantial state funding and the power of its large membership, which most likely supports political parties that address these issues. In fact, several members of parliament are prominent Martha Group members.

Currently the Martha Group has over 80,000 members in Finland and 1,934 local groups. In 1986 over 20,000 Martha theme evenings were run throughout Finland. The organization also owns and runs the Martha Hotel in Helsinki, runs numerous educational courses, sponsors many trips for members and holds annual fairs. Other Martha Group activities include an educational campaign promoting breast self-examination, the organizing of a university research project on women's activities during the Second World War, and a "mother and child in Kenya" project, which it runs in conjunction with the *Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization* (MYWO) of Kenya. Both groups are members of the Association of Country Women of the World. Martha Group work is viewed by members as educational and charitable; simply part of an attempt to improve the general human condition.

The Women's Union, on the other hand, experienced a decline in activities and membership following the victory of winning the vote. Similar to the equal rights movements in many other Western countries, most women believed that the main goal had been achieved and society would open up to accommodate women. The Union's activities were mainly confined to international peace work and small charity operations. The relationship between the state and the Women's Union was quite minimal. While the Women's Union did continue to function with a small core of dedicated and strong women, it was not until the late 1960s and early

1970s that one sees a rejuvenation of the organization, albeit in a different form.

As the second wave of feminism came to other Western countries so too it came to Finland. Within the Union radical changes occurred, with older members being superceded by younger women who articulated a clearly feminist ideology calling for an examination of patriarchal structures. An excerpt from the current Women's Union's objectives reads in part, "to eliminate discrimination against women, make female culture visible, promote equality between men and women and reinforce the feminist impact of women."

The Union's implementation of these goals involves activities on two levels, the personal and the political. Personal empowerment is achieved through consciousness raising groups, feminist radical therapy and participation in courses at the Women's Open University, founded by the Union. Political power and influence is evidenced through pressure group tactics, demonstrations, discussions and information exchange at working group meetings and through Union statements of support or non-support for legislation. For instance, the Union favours sex quotas and comparative worth to redress the gender separated workforce and the low wages found in areas of high female employment. The Union is still very active in peace work as well as projects with women in developing countries.

What then is the link between this second wave feminism and the welfare state? The Feminist Union has approximately 1,000 members. Compared to the Martha Group's 80,000 the Union is a very small organization. The Union does not have an extensive local chapter network. One could almost say that in Finland, with the strong welfare state support systems, there is no room for a strong feminist movement. The second wave of feminism represents a rejection of certain aspects of the social welfare state, particularly the idea that the proper legislation will solve all problems.

While certain areas of feminist activity are flourishing in Finland, for example the growing feminist studies programs and feminist research, the second wave of feminism has yet to find a way to gain the support of the average woman. For most women the answer to the feminism ques-

tion would be, 'We simply don't need it. We were the first to get the vote and we have an equal rights law.'

The Women's Union, though, bears the ideological struggle of feminism, and has an impact far beyond its membership count. Many members of the Union are themselves active in trade unions and party politics and are thus able to represent and articulate feminist concerns and issues.

These two groups give clear evidence that women's collective activities fall into the public sphere. Any consideration of women's power in Finland must take into account these organizations, regardless of whether the group's focus is traditional or feminist.

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NORA E. McCARDELL

Life's Work

I'd love to read my poetry to you,
The way I used to read you assignments
from school
And show you reports from college.
You were always so pleased and proud.

Before the doctorate, I knew you'd
stopped
Following the content, concentrating
instead
On the weight and feel, the covers of the
journals.
I left a copy of my thesis on the coffee
table —
So you'd have it —
Not so you'd understand.

Your appreciation of my work was
important.
Like a kitten, seeking approval,
Carrying a conquered mouse to the front
step,
I'd bring each new piece home to you.

And now, the best, the most meaningful
to me,
We can't share.
I couldn't bear you to know how sad I am
You're not there to open the door
And praise my trophy.

Shepherding the Self: Love in the Autobiography of Gudny Jónsdóttir

by Kristjana Gunnars

A Canadian observer once remarked: "Icelandic women belong to a class to themselves; a class that bears no relation to any other class." This comment seemed worth noting because it came from an outsider and it corroborated an impression I had long since formed as an insider. By class he probably meant a society or culture that is distinct in itself, a group that lives by its own rules and sets its own principles. In all the talk about Icelandic culture over the years — the Sagas, the Eddas, the Reformation, Romantic Nationalism, Icelandic Bolshevism, and so on — there always seemed to be something essential missing. A world I myself knew, whose life was never adequately described.

In order to discover something about the validity of the observation that Icelandic women constitute a separate *class* within the larger cultural spectrum, I searched out the most artless and authentic work of recent literature I could find.¹ This work is the autobiography of Gudny Jónsdóttir, published in 1973 when the author was ninety-five years of age, under the title *Bernskudagar* (Childhood Days).² Gudny Jónsdóttir was born and raised on a traditional Icelandic farm, the kind of sod farm that has existed in that country from the ninth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Her father was reasonably prosperous and employed a good many farmhands and servants. The home was also frequently visited by travellers and was the scene of district social events. The life there described by the author is traditional: people go about the centuries-old chores of shepherding, milking, spinning, knitting, haying and round-upping, and in the evenings they all gather for house-readings of the Scriptures or Sagas.

Bernskudagar covers only the author's childhood years, from as early as she can remember to the time of her confirmation in her mid-teens. The book is composed of

very short chapters, each broken into subject matter and all mostly confined to description: the progress of the text is therefore not entirely chronological. Within each chapter, a certain theme is followed on its own and examples are given from various times in the author's life. One chapter will describe the farm; another, the toys the siblings played with; another, the individuals on the farm; or certain events that illustrate a point; or the children's education, and so on. There is no attempt at being entertaining or interesting. The author seems to assume that her readers will quite naturally be interested, regardless of what she says. She is out to cause no harm or wreak no vengeance. She has no axes to grind and tells her little episodes with an air of reassurance. The voice is very much the grandmother's voice: distant but warm, and entirely sympathetic and forgiving. Perhaps the most striking feature of this book is the love with which it seems to be written — a love for everything she touches on — but it is always a love for something that seems to be very far away.

When this autobiography was published, it was thought to be significant for its descriptions of a now-vanished lifestyle. With the advent of farm machinery, automobiles, television, and public schools, people no longer do their work by hand and on foot in quite the same way, and there are no house-readings. In an era of the urbanization of the farm itself, *Bernskudagar* reminded people of the rural life they still cherished. But a careful reader will soon be alerted to a deeper significance to Gudny Jónsdóttir's narrative — which was read initially as "typically Icelandic." That stronger importance lies in the quality of love that is conveyed by the narrative voice. The more specific questions I intend to ask are: What kind of love is exhibited here? What makes this feature so distinctly Icelandic when it