

# Feminists Who Know How to Knit: Women & Crafts in Finland

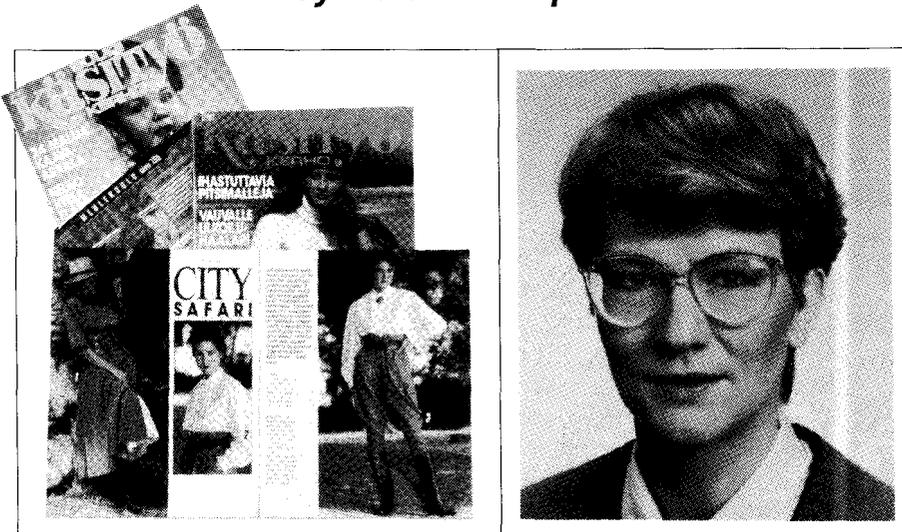
by Helena Ahopelto

Finnish women are busy indeed. They have one of the Western world's highest participation rates in the workforce, 66 per cent, and more significantly, unlike their Scandinavian sisters, 90 per cent of Finnish female waged workers are employed full-time. In addition, studies indicate, that they still perform most of the household duties and are the main caregivers of the children. Yet, they seem to have an insatiable desire to do handicrafts as well.

Every year women in Finland, a country of less than five million inhabitants, subscribe to over 200,000 handicrafts magazines. These magazines claim to have a contact factor of four, which means that some 800,000 or nearly half of all adult women in Finland, regularly read a craft magazine. In comparison, the largest Canadian handicrafts magazine, *Hands*, claims a circulation of only 60,000. Finns consume 1.5 million kilogrammes of knitting yarns annually and in 1987 they purchased 50,000 new sewing machines, although 90 per cent of the women who subscribe to the craft magazines reported already owning one.

Last year over 4,000 Finns purchased design and yarn packages to hook the ever-popular but labour intensive *ryijy* (rya rug) which can take an entire season to make. Another popular craft is to make one's own national costume. 8,000 women bought packages with all the materials and proceeded to weave the cloth, embroider the blouse and make the lace.

These extraordinary statistics beg two



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interwoven questions: Why are handicrafts so popular among Finnish women? When do these women find time to do them?

Until quite recently, Finland was mainly a rural society. A very rapid urbanization and industrialization of the country took place after the Second World War when some half a million Karelian refugees had to be relocated within the newly defined national borders and when the sons and daughters from the rural areas moved to the cities. Women were able to bring their traditional handicrafts with them to the small city apartments while many of the men's hobbycrafts demanded larger space, toolsheds, woodshelters, etc., which were left behind on the farms. Furthermore, women's knitting and sewing could be performed quietly and relatively cleanly without fear of disturbing neighbours or other family members.

The tradition of women's handicrafts continues very strongly in modern Finland, partly because of the many role models for young Finnish children and

partly because of the emphasis on handicrafts in Finland's educational system. Finnish children can see women knitting everywhere. They knit while riding a bus, while watching sports, in the university lecture halls and, of course, while watching TV. When families visit each other it is not considered impolite for the hostess and guests to engage simultaneously in conversation and their handicrafts.

Children learn the basics of knitting and crocheting in kindergarten and once they reach elementary school, handicrafts become a compulsory subject. For seven years every Finnish child receives two hours a week of instruction in crafts. For the first two years boys and girls sit in the same class but after grade two the child may choose between textile or technical crafts. The teachers are highly qualified having completed a four to five year university degree before stepping into the classroom. During this seven year period the students in the textile crafts learn a variety of modern and traditional skills. They will all know how to sew or knit their clothing items, they will have produced a variety of decorative items with lace and embroidery and they will have learned the rudiments of pattern-making and design. By the time the children become teenagers, the pattern of giving and valuing home-made gifts, both useful and decorative, has been firmly set.

In addition to formal instruction of school age children and a multitude of

high quality handicrafts magazines and books, Finland has several institutions dedicated to popularizing handicrafts and to maintaining traditional skills and craft culture. For example, the Finnish Handicrafts Organization has about 200 information centres which are open to the public. All tools and space can be used free of charge but the materials are purchased by the client. Helpful instructors are there to advise and encourage those seeking help. Instruction in handicrafts is also available at a very modest cost (highly subsidized by the government) in voluntary evening extension courses for adults. Altogether some 650,000 Finns over the age of 16 enrolled last year in the country's 280 evening non-degree granting colleges and of these students a third chose handicrafts as their subject of study.

Economic reasons are important in continuing the tradition of handicrafts. Studies indicate young women with children are most likely to sew while all women knit and older women seem to enjoy the lighter work crocheting. There is no stigma attached to wearing hand/home made clothing. In fact the opposite is true. The president's wife, factory workers, leading feminists, are all equally proud to announce that they have made their own

dress. This is not because high quality ready-to-wear clothing is hard to find but because of tradition, preference and skill. In fact, Finland is one of the only Western countries to export more clothing than it imports and the textile industry is an important part of the economy.

One can also not dismiss the importance of tradition and the desire to maintain links with their foremothers. "Nimble fingers are never idle," says the Finnish proverb. For thousands of years Finnish women have had to work relentlessly just to eke out a living from the dense forests and frozen, often barren, land. Frequently the nation was devastated by wars and ravaged by disease. There simply was no room for the "lady-of-leisure." The strong Lutheran tradition continued to teach thrift and hard work. Many Finnish women simply explain that they feel "guilty" if they are sitting down and "wasting their time." Instead they sit down and watch TV or converse with a friend with good conscience while their fingers seem to be dancing effortlessly with the knitting needles. Women are quick to emphasize that doing handicrafts is not work but a hobby, a relaxing and rewarding hobby that also has economic benefits.

Finally, for centuries handicrafts have

been an avenue for artistic expression. Every day thousands of women create objects of real beauty with innovative new designs or with carefully followed traditional patterns. Folkart is alive and well, not only in the countryside but also in the city apartments.

In Finland, handicrafts and the women's movement are not incompatible. Both are an important and integral part of women's self-expression and their need to add meaning to their lives. Feminism is not an attempt to kill creativity. If knitting is relaxing, if embroidery gives an avenue for artistic expression, if sewing is both economical and creative, then why should women not continue to pursue these traditional "women's crafts?" What is most encouraging in modern Finland is the number of men who are becoming involved in "women's crafts." Men have especially distinguished themselves in making rugs. On Christmas Eve many a happy grandmother has received a pair of wool stockings knit by her grandson.

When you next speak to a Finnish feminist, don't be afraid to ask if she made her own dress, knit her sweater or embroidered her blouse, because for Finnish women this would be a compliment!



*Together, old and young practice their handicrafts in an evening class taught by Helena Ahopelto.*

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