

The Movement For the Advancement of Women's Rights in Finland

by Dr. Riitta Jallinoja

Finland's independent women's rights movement originated in 1884 with the founding of *Finland's Association of Women*. Comparable women's organizations were also established in Sweden and Norway that same year. The largest segment of the unmarried members were teachers, a number of whom were committed to nationalistic and temperance values. The married members were wives of professors or prominent public officials, and their husbands were usually connected with nationalistic causes. Thus the Finnish women's rights movement can be seen as having emerged from the arms of the Finnish independence movement.

The close relationship between the women's movement and Finnish political aspirations for national independence had far reaching consequences. The women's movement became a stage of political conflicts. Its organization was divided first into conservative and progressive factions, and subsequently the pro-Swedish faction joined the progressives and formed the *Union League of Women's Affairs*, of which 10% of the membership was male. In 1907, the progressive segment established the *Finnish Women's League* while the *Union* continued as an organization for mainly Swedish speaking members.



Women in Finland obtained the right to vote in 1906. Immigrant women continued to agitate for the same rights in Canada. Temperance Society "Pohjankukka" Fort William, Ontario, 1911. Photo: Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society Collection.

Although the women's movement had no formal political affiliations, political controversies strongly impacted it and the Finnish women's rights movement, perhaps more than any other, became integrated into political activity.

The programs of the women's organizations did not vary a great deal. All pursued the right of women to be gainfully employed (an emphasis which at first was understood to apply only to unmarried women), the right of access to all levels of education, more equitable laws governing marriage, a change in the marital age of girls from fifteen to eighteen, universal suffrage, and an improved level of morality in general. Despite their common goals, co-operation between the three women's organizations was non-existent due to the deeply felt political differences.

The women's rights movement began in Helsinki but soon spread to other cities and to the country side. The largest number of the members belonged to the middle and upper-classes. Although there were persistent efforts to involve working-class women, they felt self-conscious among the middle-class sisterhood and found their own place in the women's labour movement, which was established in 1900.

The total membership of the three organizations reached its peak in 1918 at approximately 3600 members, about half of whom were unmarried. Although the movement's peak period was 1918, its active period ended around 1907 at the time of Finland's first parliamentary elections. In

accordance with the law passed in 1906, women were granted the right to vote and to hold seats in the parliament. To many women this achievement was quite sufficient. From then on women were going to participate actively in the arena of true decision making. Thus many activists began establishing women's organizations within, and subjunctive to national political parties. The 1907 parliament elected 19 women members (9.5% of the total), an impressive achievement when viewed in its historical context. The largest portion of these elected representatives were activists in the women's movement.

After the advent of political franchise, the women's movement led a relatively quiet life, even though women's organizational participation increased in hitherto unexperienced numbers. *The Martha League* (founded in 1899) was attracting tens of thousands of women. Its main organizational thrust focused on progress in the area of domestic labour. *The Lotta Svärd*, founded in 1921, also attracted thousands of women. It was philosophically akin to the newly reactivated Finnish nationalist movement.

It was not until the 1960s that the women's movement became truly active again. The old organizations had remained alive but their membership had declined. The average age of their members was around seventy years old. Understandably, then, as new generations became interested in women's issues, new activists needed to establish an organization of their own. Interest in the improvement of the status of women gained momentum in 1964 when a group of female university students began to voice their dissatisfaction with the status of women. In 1965, together with a few men, they founded *Group 9*, which was to establish an organization to address the question of equality for women. *Organization 9* was founded in 1966.

The principal portion of the membership of *Organization 9*, numbering approximately 700 in Helsinki, was university students and graduates. There were also a number of editors in the membership, which helped bring women's questions to the attention of the press, radio and television. 28% of the membership was male. The inclusion of men was defended on the premise that male sex roles were in need of change as well. *Organization 9* wanted to sever all ties

with the conservative views. Instead, it forged close ties with its contemporaries which *en masse* were labelled movements. Among the most important links was the one with the peace movement. The organization also had ties with two radical literary societies and other socially concerned associations. Thus, once again, the women's movement proclaimed itself free of political affiliations; its single goal being the improvement of the status of women. Soon after its founding, however, political couplings became timely concerns. From 1968 onward there was an increasing need to influence political decision making, thus political parties were seen as appropriate forums. Prior to the founding of the organization, 72% of *Organization 9* activists had not had political party affiliations, a figure which subsequently declined to 20%.

The right of married women to be gainfully employed was a central demand for the improvement of the status of women. A great number of other demands, such as availability of daycare facilities, and the division of domestic labour between spouses. Demands were also made for more liberated attitudes toward all questions concerning human sexuality. In the interest of furthering progress in these areas, members were actively engaged in organizing public debate and seminars. The women's movement adopted an investigative model as its new work format and as a large number of its members were students and academics, the choice was appropriate.

The politization of *Organization 9* hastened its demise. Activists in ever increasing numbers concentrated their work in political and other socially collective bodies. Despite the short life-span of *Organization 9*, its effect was considerable. Its initiatives in the areas of law as governing marriage, daycare, and abortion led to new, improved laws in 1970, 1973 and 1988 respectively. The organization's expressed demand for equal division of domestic labour between spouses has met with slow but real progress. Married women's participation in salaried employment has increased from 34% (1950) to 71% (1980).

The American feminist movement, which began in 1967, gained a foothold in Finland relatively late, in 1973. Influenced by feminist literature and travel abroad, Finnish women established their first

feminist associations: The Red Wives and the Marxist-Feminists. Feminism in Finland spread in two ways. On the one hand, feminists established their own associations which soon functioned as information outlets. On the other hand, the *Union* attracted women members interested in feminism. In the beginning the committed feminists found the idea of anchoring a movement in an organization unacceptable. It was seen to be in conflict with feminist principles. However, the idea slowly gained support and feminist membership in the *Union* increased. The feminist associations and the *Union* have been concerned with the same issues preoccupying feminists movements everywhere: sexuality, motherhood, maternity, women's identity, women's culture, rape, sexual harassment, and women's relationships with each other. Some of these questions have been debated publicly, others have remained part of the inner circle discussions in the interest of consciousness-raising among members. The feminist movement has not viewed the establishment of political links with the governing political parties to be as important as *Organization 9* did. The three phases of the women's rights movement in Finland have been distinctively different. However, together they have established a long and logical road to progress during which the status of women as liberated and independent human beings has assumed its character.

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