

# The Double Implication of Liberal Feminism: The Experience of the Early Women's Movement in Iceland

by Thórir Ibsen

The liberal feminist movement was an integral part of the bourgeois reform movement. It originated within the same social circle, and shared the same aspirations for individual liberty and social formation. Pivotal to the success of the new society was the preservation of the family and women's role therein. Henceforth, the double commitment of liberal feminism to women's rights proper — or equal civil and political rights — and to the celebration of women's separate domestic sphere. In the mobilization of women the latter component proved of vital importance. It also produced a powerful force of domesticism that at once prevailed over women's rights and curbed their emancipation.

In Iceland, the larger bourgeois movement manifested itself in the struggle for independence from Danish rule. Dating back to the 1840s, the movement for an independent Iceland was aroused and justified by an influx of liberalist nationalism from abroad. Eventually, there was an awareness among some that women too were persons entitled to the "Rights of Man."

From the mid 1870s, stories of the women's movement abroad were featured in the nationalist press and a few leading nationalists began speaking in favour of women's rights. In 1888, 97 women and in 1891, 244 women in the nationalist movement petitioned members of *Alþingi* (the legislative assembly) to extend to women all the rights held by men.

The first woman to speak publicly in the spirit of liberal feminism in Iceland was Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir. In 1888 she delivered a lecture in Reykjavík on the conditions and rights of women. Three years before she had written an anonymous article on the education and rights of women which had appeared in *Fjallkonan*, one of the town's newspapers. It wasn't until ten years later that women began in

earnest to cultivate an awareness among their Icelandic sisters.

Beginning in 1894, a few members of a women's association in Reykjavík, *Hild Íslenska kvenfélag* (HÍK), endeavored to mobilize women into a nation-wide women's rights organization. The following year they succeeded in collecting over 2,000 signatures from women around the country for a petition urging *Alþingi* to guarantee women equal rights. In the same year two exclusive women's newspapers were established: *Framsókn* in Seyðisfjörður and *Kvennablaðið* in Reykjavík. While the former was a committed women's rights paper, the latter was devoted more to homes and housewives. Nevertheless, *Kvennablaðið* supported increased educational and employment opportunities for women and reforms of marital legislation.

Unfortunately, women in general showed little interest in agitating for their rights. After the petition of 1895, no further collective activity took place until 1907, and the proposed national women's rights association was never formed.

While the practical and housewife oriented *Kvennablaðið* became, in its first year, the most sold newspaper in the country with 2,500 subscribers, *Framsókn* hardly survived. Its owners eventually sold the paper to Reykjavík in 1899, where new editors persisted until 1901 to continue its mandate, but in a more moderate fashion. The country's women's associations, composed primarily of privileged women, preferred to devote their energies to philanthropy and temperance. The only endeavor they engaged in relating to transforming women's situation was to promote the establishment of specific schools to prepare young women for their separate sphere.

This direction of the Icelandic women's movement is partly explained by the up-bringing and daily lived experience of the

women involved, being as they were centered around motherhood and care of the family. It was also reinforced by the ideologues of liberal feminism. While insisting that women should have the right to self-determination, they maintained that the well-being of the home was a pivotal condition for societal progress. The home was woman's separate sphere and her prime responsibility.

If the liberal ideologues, the women's associations and the popular *Kvennablaðið* cultivated an awareness among Icelandic women before the turn of the century, it was in their separate sphere as wives, homemakers and mothers. The desire and fate of most women was to become housewives and mothers.

The opening years of the 20th century marked a new period in the mobilization of women in Iceland. Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir came into contact with the 'international' suffrage movement, and subsequently adopted its standpoint. She maintained that the only way to gain civil parity with men was to focus on one issue: obtaining full political rights for women. With these rights secured, she believed all others would follow. Women should therefore unite in a specific association which would concentrate exclusively on this goal. Hence, in 1907 she established a suffrage association, *Kvenréttindafélag Íslands* (KRFÍ) and transformed her newspaper *Kvennablaðið* into its organ.

While this new move to develop a women's rights movement was somewhat more successful than the first one, the association never became very popular. During its heyday, the struggle was left to about 100 women based primarily in Reykjavík (pop. 1910, Iceland: 85,183; Reykjavík: 11,600). When *Kvennablaðið* adopted the suffrage standpoint, its popularity dropped drastically. Nevertheless, KRFÍ was instrumental in securing the 1911 legislation granting women equal

access to higher education and public offices, gaining suffrage to *Alþingi* in 1915, and in bringing about the reforms of the marital legislation in 1923, which gave women financial and personal independence in a contractual marriage. More interestingly, the association changed the course of the women's movement in Iceland.

In 1907 legislation was passed granting women in Reykjavík municipal suffrage. The legislation was to take effect the following year, shortly before the town council elections in Reykjavík. KRFÍ under the leadership of Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, wanted to sponsor a women's slate in the upcoming elections.

What she and her suffragette sisters had in mind was to get a woman elected to demonstrate that women were worthy of and wanted complete political rights.

In explaining to women why they should partake collectively in public affairs, she argued that women should work together precisely because they are women. The message was twofold: women by virtue of their femininity and domestic experience, possessed unique moral and practical qualities needed for the virtuous management of public affairs, and women in their separate sphere shared particular interests pertaining to the family, the home and their children which, due to the indifference of men, they themselves had to guard and promote in the public forum.

The message struck a fit with the world view of the reluctant women in the philanthropy movement and the lived experience of middle and upper-class women in general. Together with HÍK, KRFÍ collected over 11,000 signatures in the summer of 1907 calling on *Alþingi* to guarantee women complete suffrage and access to higher education and public offices. More importantly, KRFÍ involved HÍK and other philanthropic associations in Reykjavík in the presentation of specific women's slates for the town elections of 1908. The slate was a general success, receiving 21.3% of the valid votes. It was repeated in the town elections of 1910, 1912, 1914 and 1916, and in the National elections to *Alþingi* in 1922, receiving

20.8%, 21.1%, 11.7%, 10.1% and 22.7% of the vote, respectively.

In comparison, each time KRFÍ attempted to mobilize women on its own in the name of more radical women's rights, it had considerably less success. Its signature campaign of 1913 received just over half of the signatures collected in 1907, and its 1926 slate in the national elections to *Alþingi* received only 3.5% of the valid votes with no one being elected. The drastic defeat of KRFÍ in 1926 was also related to the consolidation of class politics in Iceland, which had already brought an end to the women's slate movement in Reykjavík.

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Although the women's movements ceased to participate in political elections as a separate force after 1926, a powerful mobilization and ideological articulation had gained momentum allowing for the establishment of a long awaited national council of women. At the Women's National Congress of 1930, the national federation *Kvenfélagasamband Íslands* was established with a commitment to provide all women in Iceland with instruction in domestic matters, and to promote the establishment of affiliated local and district associations around the country.

The federation viewed itself as more than a mere pressure group. It thought of itself as an integral part of the national fabric working for the country's progress. Its task in the common good was to elevate housewifery to a social and scientific status akin to any other occupation, and to render women more able, and in accordance with the most recent innovations and methods, to carry out their responsibilities in the home. As such it considered itself a skilled association — much like the Agricultural Association or Fishing Association — which was at once a representative and an information centre for housewives.

Although the federation was never granted its desired corporate status within the State, it became a strong organization embodying and promulgating domesticity. When it was established, the federation included over 100 women's associations and 5 district associations. By 1947 it had brought its membership to 9,790 (pop. 1959, Iceland: 143,973; Reykjavík: 56,252), 182 local associations, and 9 district associations, including women's labour unions and women's branches of the four political parties. Together these associations secured the establishment of 13 housewife schools and a teachers' college in housewifery before the end of the

Second World War, as well as obligatory domestic instruction for girls as defined in the new education laws of 1946.

The course of the early women's movement in Iceland bears a strong resemblance to that of others in Europe

and North America. The movement in Iceland differed in its short-lived ability to maintain political separateness from men, and its less vigorous agitation for civil and political rights. The former can largely be attributed to the state of confused political alignment and party formations during Iceland's transformation from the 'Politics of Independence' to 'Class Politics,' which spanned the period of the women's slates. For example, in the 1908 town elections in Reykjavík, no less than 18 different lists were offered to the electorate to choose from. With the consolidation of class politics, the women — as both leaders and electors — joined the new parties.

Two specific conditions might in particular have contributed to the second fact. Firstly, those most likely to be prone to the cause of women's rights were extremely few in Iceland. In particular, women teachers who often made up a large portion of the women's rights movement in Europe, were rare in Iceland well into the 20th century. The fact that these few women were integrated into the more moderate women's associations might have diverted their attention from the women's rights agenda. Second, the political leadership of the country demon-

strated a relatively high level of sympathy for women's rights. The resistance to women was not so much from Icelandic politicians, as from the Danish King and Government. Hence, the liberation of women could have easily been linked to the prospect of an independent Iceland.

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