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WOMEN IN ICELAND

(Ph.D Thesis)

Department of Anthropology  
University of Durham

Marie Elizabeth Johnson

1984

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the position of women in Icelandic society which incorporates historical and contemporary perspectives. It is divided into three sections, entitled Invisible Women, Visible Women and Becoming Visible.

The first part opens with an outline history of Iceland from its settlement by the Vikings until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Particular attention is paid to the life of women, both aristocrats and those of other classes and the gender-related division of labour. This analysis is elaborated in the next chapter which utilises census data from the area in which I carried out fieldwork, to examine the form and functions of the household and changes in women's role resulting from the industrialisation of the society. The following two chapters consider women's dual contemporary role as housewives and wage earners, focussing on fish-factory work.

The section entitled Visible Women concerns The Women's Day Off (Kvennafrídagurinn) held in 1975, when the majority of Icelandic women stopped work for one day. The Day is described and the reasons for the mass participation of the nation's women are analysed.

The final section of the thesis is a consideration of those organisations which have campaigned on behalf of Icelandic women. Chapter seven describes the women's societies which developed in the nineteenth century, the suffrage movement, women's trades unions and legislation during this century which formally extended women's rights. The final chapter analyses The Redstockings Movement (Rauðsokkahreyfingin), the Icelandic representative of the modern feminist movement. Its inception, structure, growth, development and relationship with other organisations are examined.

CONTENTS

Page

List of Tables and Figures..... 1

Preface ..... 7

CHAPTER ONE - BONELESS, SKINLESS AND WORMLESS ..... 10

1.1 Introduction

1.2 A Developing Interest

1.3 A Change of Perspective

1.4 Preparations for Fieldwork and Literature on Iceland

1.5 Phases of Fieldwork

1.5.1 Arrival and Early Experiences

1.5.2 The Language

1.5.3 Behind the Lace Curtains

1.5.4 Reykjavík

1.6 Writing Up and the Structure of this Thesis

1.7 Marginality and Centrality

INVISIBLE WOMEN

CHAPTER TWO - AN OUTLINE HISTORY AD 874-1800 ..... 59

2.1 Introduction

2.2 The Settlement and Commonwealth Period AD 874-1262

2.2.1 The Economy

2.2.2 The Saga Age and End of the Commonwealth

2.3 The Position of Women

2.3.1 The Portrayal of Women in the Literature

2.3.2 The Position of Women - Interpretation and Re-interpretation

2.4 The Loss of Independence

2.5 Life in the Eighteenth Century

2.6 Fróneyri in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries

2.7 The Sexual Division of Labour in the Eighteenth Century

CHAPTER THREE - HOUSEHOLD AND OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE 1820-1978 ..... 90

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Overview of the Economy and Population of Iceland and Fróneyri 1820-1978

3.3 The Data: Descriptions and Definitions

3.3.1 Households

3.3.2 Occupation and Status

3.4 Household Structure and Employment Patterns 1820-1960



3.4.1	1820
3.4.2	1840
3.4.3	1860
3.4.4	The Turn of the Century
3.4.5	1920-1960
3.4.6	A Working Life
3.5	The Contemporary Situation
3.6	Conclusions

CHAPTER FOUR - CONTEMPORARY ICELAND: WAGED WORK ..... 135

4.1	Introduction
4.2	The Employment Structure
4.2.1	The Farming Families
4.2.2	Non-Fish-Factory Workers
4.2.3	The Students
4.2.4	The Seasonal/Occasional Fish-Factory Workers
4.2.5	Part-time Fish-Factory Workers
4.2.6	Full-time Fish-Factory Workers
4.2.7	Full-time Housewives
4.2.8	Fishermen
4.3	Factors Affecting Employment Opportunities and Choices
4.3.1	National Comparisons
4.4	The Fish-Factory
4.4.1	Table Work
4.4.2	Beating the Bonus System
4.5	Emic Explanations of the Division of Labour
4.6	Dual Labour Market Theory
4.6.1	Dispensibility
4.6.2	Social Difference
4.6.3	Acquiring Training
4.6.4	Low Economism
4.6.5	Lack of Solidarity
4.7	Wage Rates and the Definition of Skill
4.8	Conclusions

CHAPTER FIVE - CONTEMPORARY ICELAND: WORK IN THE HOME..197

5.1	Introduction
5.2	Running a Home
5.3	The Home - A Woman's Place?
5.4	Invisible and Visible Work: From Method to Analysis
5.4.1	Invisible Housework
5.4.2	Visible Housework
5.5	Shopping
5.6	Food
5.7	Conclusions

VISIBLE WOMENCHAPTER SIX - KVENNAFRÍDAGURINN ..... 237

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 The Idea of a Women's Strike
- 6.3 The Context
- 6.4 Kvennafrídagurinn
- 6.5 Why the Massive Support for the Kvennafrídagur?
- 6.6 Theoretical Considerations and Ethnographic Parallels
- 6.7 The Housewife's Holiday
- 6.7.1 Relevance to the Kvennafrídagur

BECOMING VISIBLECHAPTER SEVEN - WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS ..... 275

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Women's Societies
- 7.3 Feminism and Nationalism
- 7.4 The Extension and Exercising of Formal Rights
- 7.5 "The Matter of the Gynaecological Hospital"
- 7.6 Women's Unions and Employment Legislation

CHAPTER EIGHT - RAUÐSOKKAHREYFINGIN ..... 298

- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Beginnings
- 8.3 Setting Up an Organisation
- 8.4 Spontaneity and Organisation
- 8.5 Other Characteristics
- 8.6 Changing Times: Changing Structures
- 8.6.1 "The Women's Struggle is a Class Struggle"
- 8.6.2 Formalising the Organisation
- 8.7 Campaigns, Growth and Developments
- 8.7.1 Raising Awareness and Issues
- 8.7.2 Campaigns
- 8.7.3 Practicalities and Problems
- 8.8 Relationships with Others
- 8.8.1 The Women's Rights Association
- 8.8.2 Working Class Women and Trades Unions
- 8.8.3 The Ultra-left
- 8.9 Conclusions

	<u>Page</u>
AFTERWORD - from "Wings Over Iceland" .....	350
REFERENCES	
published sources .....	351
unpublished sources etc.....	368

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LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

	Page
<u>Tables</u>	
1 The Population of Fróneyri 1820-1978	91
2 Leading Exports from Iceland Before and After Free Trade	93
3 Occupants of a House 1910	103
4 Summary of Status and Occupational Terms Discussed in the Text	108
5 Households in Fróneyri 1820	111
6 Farms and Farmshares : Families Occupying Them 1835-1855	113
7 Children Born to People in Fróneyri	120
8 Households in Fróneyri 1940	121
9 Main Occupations in Fróneyri 1978	129
10 Those Aged 15+ Earning a Wage	140
11 The Farming Families	141
12 Non-fish-factory Workers	142
13 Seasonal/Occasional Fish-factory Workers	144
14 Part-time Fish-factory Workers	145
15 Full-time Fish-factory Workers	147
16 Full-time Housewives	147
17 Fishermen	148
18 Married and Unmarried Women and Men in the Paid Labour Force	153
19 Married Women and Men : Occupations	154
20 Occupations of Farming Couples	155
21 Wage Rates in the Vestfirðir Fishing Industry 1.6.1978	189
<u>Figures</u>	
i Map of Iceland	18
ii Sailing into Seyðisfjörður	35

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES (continued)

	Page	
iii	Fróneyri As I First Saw It	35
iv	A Summer Day : The View From Above Fróneyri	37
v	Haymaking : Scything the Grass	45
vi	Haymaking : Raking the Grass	45
vii	My Last Day in the Fish-factory	46
viii	Forms and Functions of the Icelandic Household	132
ix	The Fish-factory : Gutting Machines	158
x	The Fish-factory : Men Working on the Gutting Machines	158
xi	The Fish-factory : Women Table Workers	160
xii	The Fish-factory : Freezing the Fish	162
xiii	The Fish-factory : Boxing the Fish	162
xiv	Example of a Bonus Slip (translation)	163
xv	The Centre of Reykjavík on The Women's Day Off 24.10.1975	236
xvi	Reykjavík's Main Square on <u>Kvennafrídagurinn</u>	244
xvii	The Circular Announcing The Women's Day Off	251
xviii	English Version of the Circular Letter	252
xix	Leaflet Given Out on the Election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir	273
xx	Drawing of the <u>Rauðsokkahreyfing</u> Structure	305
xxi	Pictorial Representation of the <u>Rauðsokkahreyfing</u> Ideology	310

## PREFACE

There is a hidden story that runs through this thesis and only I can know the whole of that saga. It concerns the people who have helped me, the friends I have made while doing this research.

My first thanks go to my parents, Joyce and Donald Johnson. They have always supported, but never pushed me, leaving me to make my own decisions. Only years later did they tell me that they worried as I set off, newly out of school, on my first lone voyage to Iceland. It is to them that I dedicate this thesis - the product of my journeys.

When I was an undergraduate, David Brook's lectures were rarely less than inspirational and one spring morning his words opened my mind to anthropology. The course which Ann Sutherland taught showed me that feminism and anthropology could be combined. I owe it to them that I had and took the chance to carry out research.

It was my good fortune to have Judith Okely appointed as my supervisor when she came to Durham. Through the years she has given me constant encouragement, perceptive criticism and most important of all, her friendship.

I have known many people in Iceland. Some were companions for a few hours or days, others have been friends for years. All have contributed to my understanding of the country and the people named here must stand for all the others. In Reykjavík, I think of Vilborg, Dídí, Edda, Björn, Eggert, Kayla, Steve, Jóhanna and Gils. In Fróneyri



I shared hours in the fish-factory, cold winter days and long summer evenings with Dagga, Magga, Helene, Egill, Ingibjörg, Óli, Björg, Salla, Sigríður, Lára and 'Steindór'.

Anna Sigurðardóttir put the contents of The Women's History Library at my disposal and her enthusiasm inspired me to delve ever deeper among the archives. Members of the Rauðsokkahreyning made me welcome at their meetings, answered my questions and listened to my ideas. Orri and Ingibjörg had more patience than any adult in rehearsing my Icelandic pronunciation. To Guðný and 'Guðrún', two women of Iceland who took me into their homes, I owe a special debt. Through knowing them especially, I began to learn not only about Iceland but also myself.

In Gill Foulger and Judy Jesch I have two good friends who have helped me in innumerable ways. The knowledge and perception they have of Iceland has always challenged me to refine further my own ideas.

Returning from the field and writing up is possibly the hardest part of anthropological research. I have been helped through this period by David Brooks, Tom Holman, Allison James, Jeremy James, Jenny Hockey, Bob Simpson, Jane Szurek, Ian Whitelaw, Malcolm Young and the others who came to meetings of the Friday Night Seminar Group. Robert Layton steered me through the final stages of bringing the thesis to completion.

My friend Renée Hodson took on the task of turning my handwritten draft into typescript. Renée and another friend Maureen Hordon, typed the final version. It speaks for itself: a tribute to their skills.

For financial support, I thank the trustees of the

Periam Fund, Henley Grammar School, for help towards my trip to Iceland in 1976 and the S.S.R.C. for my research grant. My family have helped me during the writing up and contributed to the cost of producing the thesis.

To those named here and all the others who have helped me along the way, I can only express inadequate thanks.

Marie Johnson

Wallsend

July 1984

CHAPTER ONE - BONELESS, SKINLESS AND WORMLESS

"To me Iceland is sacred soil. Its memory is a constant background to what I am doing. No matter that I don't make frequent references to the country; it is an equally important part of my life for all that. I may be writing about something totally unrelated, but it is still somewhere close by. It is different from anything else. It is a permanent part of my existence, even though I am not continually harping on it. I said it was a kind of background, that's right. I could also say that Iceland is the sun colouring the mountains without being anywhere in sight, even sunk beyond the horizon."

W.H. Auden, in a newspaper interview, Reykjavík 1964<sup>1</sup>

"May the Holy Mother Cow shit the biggest turd on the lowest people I have ever met."

'Australian' woman fish-factory worker, written on a door in a fish-factory house, 1977<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Introduction

Iceland, the marginal land of ice and fire provokes extreme reactions. You either delight at the huge sky and dramatic landscape or shiver at the bleak, treeless wastes.

- 
1. Quoted in Magnússon, 1977:ix
  2. There is a lack of labour in Iceland for the fish-factories, so foreigners are employed on short-term contracts. They are recruited in London and are usually Australian and New Zealand women travelling the world. In Iceland, whatever their nationality such women are known as Australians. Fish-factory houses originally housed fishermen. Today they are used by foreign workers.

The people appear hospitable and straightforward or stand-offish and peremptory. During my encounter with Iceland I have swung between the rapture of the poet and the disaffection of the guest-worker. Iceland has given me perfect days and lasting friendships, evil, dark times and hateful encounters.

Pocock wrote of the importance of the student anthropologist being brought to an awareness of their "personal anthropology" (1971:viii). Just how personally engaging participant-observation fieldwork is, was first publically revealed by Bowen who wrote towards the end of her novel:

"Many of my moral dilemmas had sprung from the very nature of my work, which had made me a trickster; one who seems to be what he is not and who professes faith in what he does not believe. But this realisation is of little help. It is not enough to be true to oneself. The self may be bad and need to be changed, or it may change unawares into something strange and new. I had changed. Whatever the merits of anthropology to the world or of my work to anthropology, this experience had wrought many changes in me as a human being - and I had thought that what wasn't just grist for my notebooks would be adventure."

(1956:250)

It was while I was working one day in the fish-factory that I conceived the conceit of seeing the dissection of the fish as a metaphor for my academic endeavours in Iceland. The boxes in which the fish was packed proclaimed that it was boneless and skinless. There was no mention that it was also wormless; customers are not supposed to know that fish have worms. It pleased me to see that my aim was not only to find out what was obvious and self-proclaimed by Icelanders, but also to

discover what was hidden or obscured. It was only months later, as I contemplated my return to England and reviewed my experiences in Iceland that I saw that the metaphor, imperfect as it was, could be applied to myself. I had also been laid out on the table and filleted: subject to the scrutiny of the Icelanders and an enhanced degree of self-analysis. I had been taken to the limits of my energy and tolerance. For me the discipline of regularly keeping a diary had engendered a curious disassociation. Through the process of consciously, and in depth, recording my relationships and interaction with others and the assessment of my own 'performance' I had become aware in a new, and very often uncomfortable, way. I did not always like the self that was revealed but sometimes I was pleasantly surprised. Like Bowen I could say that I had changed.

Anthropology is increasingly acknowledged to involve a relationship between 'us' and the 'other' (Crick, 1982: 15-16). One of the factors which has provoked this is the literature which discusses the experiential dimensions of fieldwork. The self/other dichotomy is challenged and replaced with consideration of the complex nexus within which knowledge is generated. Bowen chose the form of the novel and felt constrained to use a pseudonym when she published her personal account. She also distinguished between writing as a social anthropologist and "simply as a human being" (op.cit.:preface). This distinction still largely remains as such accounts are published as posthumous diaries (Malinowski, 1967), autobiographies (Powdermaker, 1966; Lévi-Strauss, 1976) or

annotated diaries (Cesara, 1982), separate from the main body of an anthropologist's writings.

One reason for this separation between anthropological process and product, the experience and knowledge which is presented, is the objectivity/subjectivity division which can be traced throughout European history (Brown:1977). While positivism was an unchallenged paradigm anthropologists were reticent about the experiential aspects of fieldwork because the discipline could be criticised as lacking 'scientific' rigour. This meant that on the one hand anthropologists declared the virtue of their method of research based on long-term involvement in a society; this ensured, it was maintained, the transcendence of ethnocentrism, that no aspect of a culture was ignored a priori as irrelevant, and that the analysis grew out of the data rather than being the result of hypothesis - testing. On the other hand, how this was to be achieved, was obscured, left undiscussed because of the prevailing view that an imperfectly understood notion of 'the scientific method' was directly applicable to the social sciences.

In their exploration of the place of metaphor in human understanding Lakoff and Johnson examined what they called the myths of objectivism and subjectivism, and posited an experientialist alternative.

"An experientialist approach also allows us to bridge the gap between the objectivist and subjectivist myths about impartiality and the possibility of being fair and objective. The two choices offered by the myths are absolute objectivity, on the one hand, and pure subjective intuition, on the other. We have seen that

truth is relative to understanding, which means that there is no absolute standpoint from which to obtain absolute objective truths about the world. This does not mean there are no truths; it means only that truth is relative to our conceptual system, which is grounded in, and constantly tested by, our experiences and those of other members of our culture in our daily interactions with other people and with our physical and cultural environments.

Though there is no absolute objectivity, there can be a kind of objectivity relative to the conceptual system of a culture. The point of impartiality and fairness in social matters is to rise above a relevant individual biases."

(1980:193-4)

When engaging in participant observation, the dialectical interaction with members of a culture they seek to understand, anthropologists are not following a set of procedures, a protocol for obtaining data. For Agar, participant-observation is

"..... neither a method nor a kind of data; instead, it is the situation that makes our work possible at all."

(1982:792)

He also saw ethnographies, texts that are presented, as shaped by a number of factors.

"In short, ethnographies are a function of the different traditions of ethnographer, group and intended audience. Ethnography is at its core a process of "mediating frames of meaning" (Giddens 1976). Its nature will depend on the nature of the traditions that are brought into contact during fieldwork. This argument advises us to quit worrying about person-independent access to an objective world, not because it is a difficult goal, but because it is a delusional one that strips away some important aspects of ethnographic work.

On the other hand, the argument gives little comfort to what Hirsch (1976) calls the "cognitive atheists" either. An ethnographic report is not just a personal account specific to the moment without anchors in traditions besides the ethnographer's. There is a human group out there who lived in a world before the ethnographer appeared and who will continue to do so after the ethnographer leaves. Ethnography, in short, is a function of the groups studied as well.

Ethnographer, intended audience, and groups all represent traditions that limit, but do not determine, the possible ethnographic reports that can emerge. In the words of the old opposition ethnography is neither "subjective" nor "objective". It is interpretive, mediating two worlds through a third."

(ibid.:783)

This thesis has indeed been shaped by my interaction with Icelanders and the audience for whom it has been written. In the following examination of the factors which shaped my fieldwork experience I am not indulging in mere egoism. For as Okely stated:

"In the study of human beings by another human being, (and what better medium is there?), the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present, and must therefore be acknowledged, explored and put to creative use."

(1975:172)

Through attention to what may be characterised as (following Lakoff and Johnson) "individual biases"; that is my long involvement with Iceland, what I did there and what was done to me, I feel that I can reveal that truth which should not be confused with 'intuitive subjectivity' or 'cold objectivity'.



## 1.2. A Developing Interest

I cannot now pinpoint when or how I first developed an interest in Iceland. I do remember being glad, when I was in my early teens, to receive a 'surprise' Icelandic penfriend from the penpal club to which I belonged. I was pleased because I was already attracted to the country. Unlike so many foreigners before me I had not come to be aware of Iceland because of the literature. I had not at that age read any of the Sagas. I can only guess now that it was a visual image, probably a television programme, which awakened my interest. My penfriend and I corresponded for some years but the letters petered out when we were in our late teens.

I first travelled to Iceland in 1973 during my 'year off' between leaving school and going to university. One evening walking home from my job, I passed a travel agency which displayed all sorts of exotic destinations in its window. The moment is still a vivid memory: there and then I decided to go to Iceland for a holiday. A work-mate wanted to come with me, but this I did not want. This was to be the culmination of a very personal, private dream and I meant to make my voyage alone.

It was a voyage in truth, because I took the boat from Leith to Reykjavík. Like the nineteenth century travellers whose books I read later, I noticed how the Icelanders on board came to gaze at their country as soon as we came in sight of land, and saw (seeming to float in between earth and sky) the great Vatnajökull glacier. In my diary that night I wrote about my first

sight of Iceland

"At first it was indistinct but gradually the shore emerged. A long, low flat strandflat flanked by low, rounded hills and above that rose the mountains. The sky was clear and the clouds billowed and reformed. You could actually feel the forces of the wind. I felt exhilarated and happy."

That same day we sailed past the Vestmannaeyjar; it was just a few months after the volcanic eruption which almost destroyed the town on the main island. People were taking pictures of it, but I could not. My diary hardly reveals the strong reaction I felt to this sight.

"The lava has cooled to a dull, reddish colour but steam billowed up in white clouds with a tinge of yellow sulphur. The steam rose and formed a cloud that obscured the sun. The town looked really pathetic - little red and green roofs sticking out of the ash."

I had quickly been forced to recognise that "ice and fire" is something more than a cliché.

For five weeks I travelled around Iceland, usually alone. I hitch-hiked to all the major tourist attractions such as the Gullfoss waterfall, the site of the eponymous Geysir, the weird area around the Mývatn lake where the American astronauts trained for the moon-landings. It was exhilarating. The weather was good - just a little light snowfall when I was camping at Mývatn, and I found the climate generally congenial - not too hot. The landscape was to me quite awesome and I had never been so aware of the sky. I understood

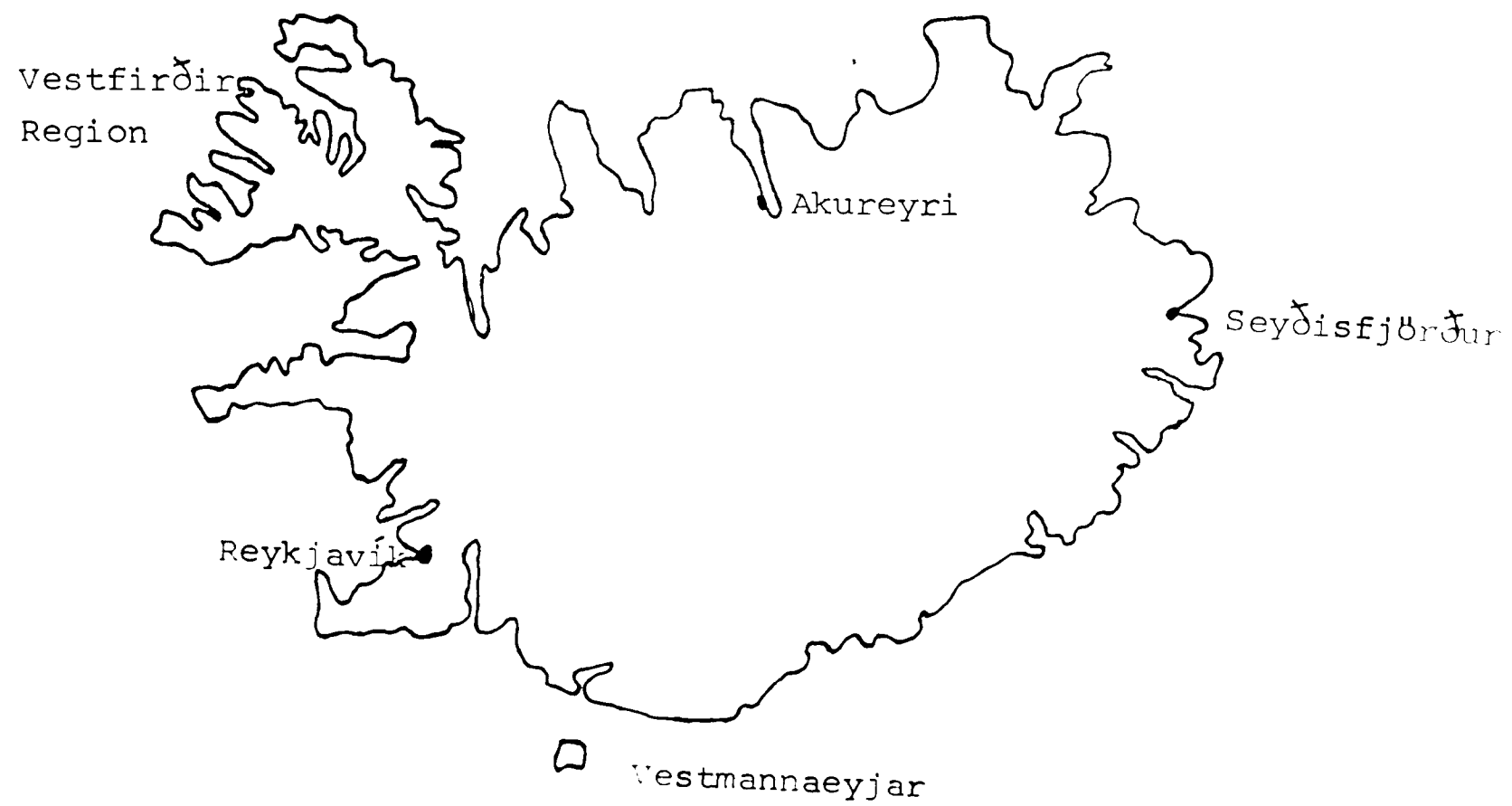


Figure 1 Map of Iceland

exactly what the Icelander meant, who was reported as saying, "England has no scenery, the trees get in the way." I also revelled in the freedom of hitch-hiking alone in perfect safety and being able to camp more or less where I wished. For the first time I encountered the generosity of the Icelanders. I was invited to spend a few days in a summerhouse on the shores of the Þingvallavatn lake, near the site where the original Icelandic parliament was held. My old penfriend and her family took me into their home during my last days in the country. They showed me around Reykjavík and its surrounding area and arranged visits to the cinema and theatre. I sailed for home with vivid memories of what had been something more than just a lovely holiday.

I really had no thought of returning to Iceland until I was asked if I was interested in carrying out post-graduate research. Just like my original decision to go there, it took no more than a moment for me to know that I would go to Iceland to look at the life of women there. In the intervening years my personal involvement in feminism had been integrated into my anthropological studies, chiefly through the course taught by Ann Sutherland on "The Social Anthropology and Biology of Women". I had kept up with the news from Iceland and had heard of The Women's Day Off when the majority of the country's women stopped work held in 1975 (see chapter six). That I should study "Women in Iceland" had all the force of massive self-evidence; it was the synthesis, that transcended the distance, between personal and academic interests. I believe now that only

the enthusiasm that came from such deep certainty could have given me the courage and confidence to go to live in a foreign country, the dogged determination to learn a new language, the commitment to complete this thesis.

### 1.3. A Change of Perspective

I was to start my post-graduate research in October 1976. Prior to that I made a short visit to Iceland in August. In one respect it was a very bad experience. In Britain it was the year of the heat-wave, in Iceland there was only fog and rain. I got bronchitis and had to cut short my visit. In another way I got much more from this short visit than I could have hoped for. In my diary I wrote "Luck - or is it fate?" I had gone to NorrænaHúsið cultural centre and asked for information about feminism in Iceland. The librarian told me to stay there, went off and came back with Anna Sigurðardóttir, one of the founders, and the curator, of The Library of the History of Icelandic Women. We went to her home and talked and she also put me in touch with others who had been involved in the feminist movement in Iceland and the organisation of The Day Off. The next day I called at the centre which the Rauðsokkahreyfing (Redstockings Movement) feminists ran. Again I was welcomed, interest was shown in my research and I was recommended to visit various other people.

I could not have known then that this experience was to be repeated throughout the fieldwork I conducted in Iceland from June 1977 to April 1979. In fact, conducted

is the wrong verb to convey what happened, Although I had written a research proposal and knew there were specific areas I wanted to learn about and particular situations I wanted to investigate, what actually happened during my period of participant-observation was not conducted, in the sense of being wholly controlled, by me. Happenstance did play a part but so did the Icelanders' reactions to me and the way I was passed along lines of kinship and friendship, that was typical of the culture. The ethos of sharing is illustrated in one of the Icelandic Christmas folktales which concerns the Christmas Cat. This is a huge monstrous animal, where it comes from nobody knows, which preys on poor people who receive no new clothes for Christmas. In a published version of the story, one of the verses goes:

"It was attracted to poor people  
who did not receive new clothing  
for Christmas - and lived in  
a miserable state"

(Jóhannes úr Kötlum, 1975:26)

People, small children in particular, are saved from the Cat by being given presents of new clothes at Christmas. The moral of the tale, expressed in the last two verses, is to give to others, else they will be victims of the Cat, which can be seen as a symbolic representation of the rugged environment.

In this small nation, total population just under 250,000, kinship and other forms of personal relationship play an important part in such things as securing a job or obtaining accommodation. The most telling piece of advice I ever received during my fieldwork was given soon

after my arrival, "if you want to get to know the Icelanders ask them to do things for you." In time I learnt how to do so, but especially at the beginning, I did not have to ask - I was the (very grateful) recipient of unsolicited advice and help. I also sought for ways in which I could reciprocate for what I received. This was all part of the learning process: experiencing the ways in which Icelandic society operated and acquiring the skill to operate within it in an appropriate manner.

This was the change of perspective. My first visit had been the fulfilment of a dream; it had marked my transition from schoolgirl to student and I had kept my distance from Icelandic society, spending most of my time quite literally in the wild of the mountains, lakes and lava fields. This second visit was when I started to approach Icelandic society and it, or at least part of it, came out to embrace me.

#### 1.4. Preparations for Fieldwork and Literature on Iceland

There are comparatively few published anthropological works concerning Iceland today. When I was preparing to go on fieldwork, from October 1976 to May 1977, there were even fewer. In the early literature I found one book (1905) and an article (1903) by Annandale which briefly discussed physical anthropology and concentrated on material culture. In more recent times there have been a few anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in the country or based their research on a study of the literature. As a result of her short study in the

island Thompson has produced some articles (1960, 1963) and a section in a book (1969). A theme of Thompson's work is how what she calls the "core values" of Icelandic society, as expressed in the Sagas, are to be found in the modern society. She described how in the early period of Iceland's settlement the people had to co-operate in a hostile environment and developed a system of patronage based on territorial division, and the hierarchy of þings (assemblies). An individualistic ethic was retained and people were responsible for their own actions and property. She discerned the same elements present today, when there is a centralised governmental system but a large degree of devolved power in the fishing and farming co-operatives, and strongly-held belief that it is upto the individual to achieve their goals.

A full-length work on modern Icelandic society is Björnsson's The Lutheran Doctrine of Marriage in Modern Icelandic Society (1971). This was originally a Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Faculty of Divinity at Edinburgh University. It was jointly supervised in the Anthropology Department and incorporated data from interviews with people living in Akranes, a town near Reykjavík. In a subsequent article, Björnsson (1976) explained the very high rate of illegitimacy and the family system in Iceland in terms of the pre-Christian institution of betrothal, which despite the Conversion and Reformation continued to confer moral justification on sexual relations before marriage.

Wax's work on the Vikings (1969) exemplifies the trend for anthropologists to focus on Iceland's past



or on the links between past and present. Turner (1971) wrote an analysis of Njál's Saga and Durrenberger considered Gautrek's Saga (1982). Merrill (1964) and Rich (1976) considered kinship terminology past and present. In 1979 Pinson Gill took up the issue of Icelandic kinship, basing her article on field research carried out on a farming area of northern Iceland. Her thesis (1978) had as its central theme the continuities and changes in economic endeavour and social organisation in Iceland. Hastrup's work has concerned aspects of Icelandic history (1977, 1979a, 1981 and 1982). Her thesis (1979b) explored the classificatory system - time, space, kinship, political structures, cosmology and history of mediæval Iceland. Ancient Icelandic society as portrayed in the literature and the interpretation of more recent folktales have been the subject of research by Babcock (1976, 1978). Other subjects which anthropologists have considered in relation to Iceland are fishing (Pálsson 1979; Pálsson and Durrenberger, 1982), the ethos of social equality (Broddason and Webb, 1975) the semantics of orientation (Haugen 1969) and children's games (Rich 1978).

There was no dearth of literature which explored Icelandic history and it was to this area that I turned. My reading comprised books on history and historical books. In the former category were books on Viking and specifically Icelandic history such as Briem (1945), Foote and Wilson (1970), Gíslason (1973), Gjerset (1922), Jóhannesson (1974), Simpson (1967), Wilson (1970), Þórðarson (1941) and Þorsteinsson (1936). In the latter

category were accounts of travellers to Iceland. These ranged in date from the eighteenth to the twentieth century but most were written during the nineteenth. Iceland became a destination, admittedly a slightly off-beat one, on the Grand Tour as evinced by Taylor's Egypt and Iceland in the Year 1874 (1875), Dillon's A Winter in Iceland and Lapland (1840), and Browne's The Land of Thor (1867) in which he described Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Faroes as well as Iceland. Among others who made the journey to Ultima Thule, Sagaland or the land of Frost and Fire, as they tended to refer to it, were Burton (1875), Collingwood (1899), Dufferin (1857), Mackenzie (1812), Morris (1969), Oswald (1882) and Pfeiffer (1852).

The object for most of these travellers was to see the places where the events of the Sagas took place as the titles of the books imply: Iceland: Scenes and Sagas (Baring-Gould, 1863), A Pilgrimage to the Saga Steads of Iceland (Collingwood and Stefánsson, op.cit.), The Home of the Eddas (Lock, 1879) and Iceland, Horseback Tours in Sagaland (Russel, 1914). An exception was Henderson whose main purpose was to distribute copies of the Bible (1819). Most of these authors described Reykjavík and gave en passant an indication of the living conditions of the Icelandic people in whose homes they, wealthy foreigners, expected to receive and got, overnight accommodation. They concentrated on the landscape and the Saga sites, where because there were few relics, remains or ruins, they could let their imagination have full rein. The epitome of this response to Iceland is

Auden and MacNiece's Letters from Iceland (1937), where the country and its people are the stimulus and form the backdrop for their literary endeavours. Exceptions were Troil (1780), Burton, (op.cit.) and Oswald (op.cit.) who described aspects of Icelandic society and economy at some length.

The other main tasks I took on prior to leaving for fieldwork were starting to learn Icelandic and writing a proposal to the S.S.R.C. The linguaphone course proved of limited use. This was because the language is very grammatical, so there is a limit to how much can be learnt in a short time by the method of listening and repeating. The course did help to tune my ears to the sounds of the language, gave me sufficient conversation to express simple information about myself and gave me an idea of the size of the problem I faced.

My research proposal grew out of the reading I had done in general anthropological, feminist and Icelandic literature. The three main areas of my research were stated as follows:

- a. examine the development of the Icelandic women's movement in the context of a society which has undergone significant changes in the last hundred years. This will involve a study of the available records as well as interviews with members of the older women's organisations.
- b. study the contemporary groups: their organisation ideology, actions and articulation with other groups such as political parties and trades unions. An important part of this aspect of the study will be the investigation of the Women's Day Off - how they decided upon the form of their action, the issues to be publicised and how this was presented to and interpreted by women outside the movement and the men. This will be achieved by participant observation and interviews during my time in Reykjavík.

- c. an integral part of this study will be a period of participant observation in a community outside Reykjavík. This will give me insight into the contemporary role of men and women in Icelandic society and an opportunity to see how significant the women's movement has been and is at the local level.

(Johnson, 1977:5)

These were the aims I had when I set off.

## 1.5. Phases of Fieldwork

### 1.5.1. Arrival and Early Experiences

I sailed for Iceland from Scrabster in the north of Scotland. I was determined not to begin my fieldwork with anything as mundane as leaving from one tatty airport and arriving at another. After a short stay in the Faroes the boat docked at Seyðisfjörður on Iceland's east coast. From there I hitch-hicked around the island to Reykjavík.

In England I had met a woman married to an Icelander and it was to her sister-in-law that I went on my arrival in the capital. The language course at the university did not begin for a few months so I decided to go to an Icelandic village in order "to get rid of my tourist image of the country" as I phrased it to myself. The Icelandic way of utilising personal contacts came into operation. My hostess contacted a distant relative and in a few days I was working in a fish-factory. Foreigners are usually only employed during the busy winter season so I was lodged alone in the fish-factory house except for an Icelandic woman, Vilborg, who was working as a

ship's cook during the summer.

For two months I worked the normal full-day in the factory from 8am to 7pm. We had weekends off and occasionally finished early. My sessions with the linguaphone course meant that I could understand enough to get by in terms of what I had to do in the factory. Although they learn English in schools most of the young Icelanders were shy of using it. It was the older people who made the greatest effort to find out about me and tell me of themselves. We communicated with the help of sign language and a pocket dictionary.

The amount of verbally communicated information I received during this time was limited but the experience was valuable for a number of reasons. In this phase of my fieldwork, apart from doing the factory work, I was almost exclusively an observer, not expected to take part in what was going on to any great extent. I had leisure to speculate, raise questions but was not under stress to go out and get answers. I did learn a lot while I was there but perhaps more importantly I had a whole list of unanswered questions. I also think that this (largely) uncomprehending immersion in Icelandic helped me later on. It is not possible to explain it any more technically than say my ear became tuned in. This meant I relatively quickly picked up the rhythm and cadences of Icelandic when I did come to speak it and my comprehension of spoken Icelandic quickly developed<sup>3</sup>.

Living in the village certainly did knock any residual romanticism out of me. There was the grind of

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3. I could only judge this by comparison with others in the class at the university.

the fish-factory work, the aggressive atmosphere of the saturday night dances where people drank themselves silly from their individual bottles of spirits, and the knife fight in the fish-factory house - my first encounter with such overt violence. It was also here that my Icelandic name, María, became established and I learnt to introduce myself, shaking hands with everyone and not waiting for a mutual third party to do the honours. I made small unthinking mistakes, based on my cultural conditioning, such as looking under Johnson when signing for my wages, instead of María as I 'knew' I should. Making such mistakes was part of the process of learning about the culture. Icelanders have a given name which is their name. The second name, formed from their father's first name with son (son) or dóttir (daughter) appended, is for further reference but does not indicate family connections as a surname does<sup>4</sup>. Male names do reoccur through generations of a family by being alternated, so that Helgi Gunnlaugsson may have a father Gunnlaugur Helgason and a grandfather Helgi Gunnlaugsson. Female names cannot alternate in this manner but daughters may have the same first name as their mothers or other relatives. I discovered when analysing the census data I obtained, that girls might be given feminine versions of their father's, paternal grandfather's or maternal grandfather's name. i.e. The daughter of Jón Sigurðsson and Ingibjörg Halldórsdóttir

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4. A few families have surnames which were adopted in past centuries. The taking of new ones is forbidden by law. Children have to be given Icelandic names and immigrants have to take an Icelandic name.

might be called Jónina, Sigríður or Halldóra. A woman's second name does not change upon marriage.

In practice Icelanders introduce themselves by saying "I am called Dagbjört Gísladóttir" and if they are known by a short version of their name will add "called Dagga". Titles such as Mr., Mrs., and Miss exist, but are never used except occasionally in writing. Children call their parents Mamma and Pabbi, grandparents Amma and Afi and may call aunts and uncles Frænka and Frændi. They use the first name of all other adults. Listings such as the telephone book and the wages records I had to sign, are arranged alphabetically by first name.

During my time in this village I took detailed notes on the work in the fish-factory, the division of labour and bonus system. I found that even with just a tentative grasp of the language I could begin to get an idea of the relationships between people, the reputation of the different fishing boats, the broad outlines of property ownership in the village. But most of all I learnt how difficult it was going to be to gain access to people's homes. Camaraderie in the fish-factory was one thing, entering homes another.

#### 1.5.2. The Language

I wrote something pretty banal on the fish-factory door where over the years foreign workers had put their comments: "ég tala ekki íslensku (I don't speak Icelandic) - but I shall one day". It expressed my main concern at the time, something I could definitely anticipate as a

problem, which depended on my efforts to overcome.

Icelandic is undoubtedly one of the more complicated European languages. Some Icelanders hyperbolically claimed it as the most complicated in the world. While this cannot be accepted as a truth, such claims indicate the important place Icelandic has in the national consciousness. The language, combined with pride in the ancient literature, has an important place as a definition of nationhood. There is an effort, successful to a degree, to keep out international loan words and there have been parliamentary debates as to whether z should be in the orthography. While I was in Iceland there was much discussion and some academic research on the quality of Icelandic spoken by children.

Icelandic is the old Norse language which has hardly simplified or diversified as Norwegian, Danish and Swedish have. With a background that included Latin and German, the principles of how the language worked were clear to me - learning it was another matter. The spelling is quite phonetic and the pronunciation fairly consistent. For me, a southern English woman, the main difficulty was getting over my lazy way with vowel sounds and the end of the words, because the former are carefully differentiated and the language is inflected by additions to the end of words.

I attended the first semester of the "Icelandic For Foreigners" course at the university; four months when the whole of the grammar was covered. In the evenings I drummed noun declensions, verb conjugations and vocabulary lists rhythmically into my memory. I had



assumed that communicating was wholly my responsibility and depended entirely on my efforts. I soon discovered that a great deal depended on my relationship with individuals. Icelanders are not used to hearing their language spoken in a different/funny way. There are no dialects and regional differentiation of accent is minimal. Above all, the people are not habituated, as are English speakers, to hearing various versions of their language. In the early stages it often happened that even if I spoke perfectly grammatical Icelandic, people simply did not comprehend me until they were used to my voice and accent. I also recognised that a degree of mutual confidence had to be developed which largely depended on my keeping the sentence going with the correct rhythm. Grammatical accuracy was sacrificed. The 20 seconds or so it took me to figure out the genitive plural ending of the strong form of the adjective appropriate for a feminine noun without an attached definite article, meant that my listeners' eyes glazed over and embarrassed anxiety increased. It was better to plough on and make a stab at it, ignoring the wincings but remembering the correction. I never did speak Icelandic like a native although I did achieve reasonable fluency. Right to the end the quality of the exchanges depended on mutual effort and confidence.

### 1.5.3. Behind the Lace Curtains

During my first winter in Iceland I found I was attracted to a particular house on my route to the

university. It was a rather pretty old timber house but others of a similar type had not drawn me in the same way. Finally it dawned upon me that this house had no lace curtains: I could see inside. Such curtains which prevent outsiders seeing in, are used almost universally in Iceland. I had been fascinated by this house because it gave me a glimpse of where I wanted to go - inside the home.

There is precious little 'street life' in Iceland. The exception is that the teenagers often drive around in cars on summer weekends, stopping at the sjoppa (kiosk) to pick up a coke, hot dog and friends, in an Icelandic version of American Grafitti. I participated in this a few times but was rather "matter out of place" on account of my age and 'status' as a doctoral student, which distanced me from the teenagers. There are few communal meeting places in small Icelandic villages, nothing like a pub or café. In Fróneyri<sup>5</sup> the village hall was used for dances and film shows. The fish-factory house was where the younger people met at weekends.

It was this reality which shaped my fieldwork strategy of living with families and working in the fish-factory. Over and above the fact that I wanted information on fish-factory work itself, I knew that this would provide an opportunity for me to get to know Icelanders and for them to get to know me. I would be the last to deny the great hospitality of the Icelanders but I wanted to get beyond ceremony and be treated - well, unceremoniously. I chose to go to Vestfiðir, the

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5. Fróneyri is a pseudonym for the village in which I lived.

north-west region, to carry out this part of the research because I knew that I would, as a foreigner, stand a good chance of getting employment there. Vilborg, the woman I had met the previous summer, happened to be working in Vestfiðir and I stayed with her for a few days. It was she who arranged for me to get a lift to a small village. It was winter, most roads were only open a couple of days a week when the snowplough went through. Vilborg knew an electrician who was going to a village to do a job in the fish-factory. It was a place I had already considered as a location for my village study. I was dropped at the factory door and the shop floor manager was fetched. I asked for work and got it. Accommodation? No, I did not want to live in the in the factory house but with a family. He said he would put up a notice. My presence in the village was announced in the following terms on the fish-factory door and in the shop window.

#### ATTENTION

#### Young British Girl

A university student very much wants to live here in (Fróneyri) and work part-time in the fish-factory. Would prefer to live with a family because she wants to learn Icelandic. Will help with housework and so on.

From inquiries<sup>6</sup> she is teetotal<sup>7</sup>, pleasant and altogether comes across well.

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6. I subsequently found out that he had telephoned the factory where I had worked previously.
  7. Reglusöm literally means orderly. It is used in accommodation advertisement as a code word meaning that the person is teetotal, or at least not a heavy drinker.



Figure ii Sailing Into Seyðisfjörður



Figure iii Fróneyri As I First Saw It

If anyone is interested please let me know as soon as possible.

(signature shop floor manager)

As it turned out it was not these notices which got me a place to live. After this five minute exchange I trudged the length of the village, contemplating the long, cold hours until the electrician went back. There was nowhere to go, even the church was locked. Then I heard children's voices and set off in that direction. I was amused to be doing 'the traditional anthropological thing' of contacting the 'big men'. If not the chief and witch-doctor, at least the factory manager and schoolteacher. It was lunchtime and the children were milling around in the hallway, I told the headmaster who I was and what my purpose was in coming to the village. I had decided that I would say that I was an anthropologist, a doctoral student and interested in learning about Icelandic life. I did not explicitly reveal that my main focus was on women. This was in part because I neither wanted people to pre-package what they told me about nor to make assumptions of my interest or non-interest in areas of life. The other reason was that "helvitis, kommi Rauðsokkar" (hellish, commie feminist) was a term of abuse in Iceland<sup>8</sup>. Until I had time to know something of the village people and they had time to assess me I did not want to be stereotyped with a possible contentious image.

"Mannfræðingur" (anthropologist) echoed the children. "Well", I thought, "that will be all around the village in five minutes". It was. As I walked back through the village a passing car slowed and someone shouted (in

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8. Rauðsokkar came to mean a feminist in the general sense rather than a member of the actual organisation.



Figure iv A Summer Day: The View From  
Above Fróneyri

Icelandic) "Damn anthropologist, go away, we don't want you here". I had psyched myself up for this day. "Damn you", I thought, "I'm here and I'm going to stay". Another teacher had invited me to lunch and it was she who found me somewhere to stay. I never discovered what negotiations took place but I found myself offered a room with a middle-aged couple, in exchange for a reasonable rent and household duties. I was taken on a month's approval and stayed seven.

As I had anticipated, working in the factory was vital for making contact with people. (In Fróneyri I only worked the morning shift of 8 to 12). In the first few weeks I hardly saw people outside. In the factory women tended to work in settled partnerships (see section 4.4.1.) but did accept a temporary substitute if their partner was not working. I became the regular substitute in the factory, once it was established that I knew the job. This was very useful for me because it meant that I worked with practically every woman and got direct information about them and their families and invitations to visit their houses. I was a most diligent visitor which had one curious drawback. One evening I sat after dinner feeling oddly light-headed. I had not touched alcohol for weeks. When I counted up I realised I had drunk 14 mugs of the extremely strong Icelandic coffee that day, during my social round. Strange indeed are the hazards of fieldwork.

The people in Fróneyri knew I was a foreigner, a woman and an anthropologist<sup>9</sup>. They soon learnt that I was single, 24 years of age, English and doing a Ph.D. thesis. These characteristics and the way in which I entered the life there,

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9. Initially some people thought I was a physical anthropologist.



via table work in the fish-factory, affected the relationships I began to develop. It was the middle-aged women and through them, their husbands, whom I got to know first. They gave me the name Maja, the short version of María. My academic status was largely beside the point for them, as indicated by their frequent inquiries about my family, whether I missed them and if I was lonely. I was often teased about finding an Icelandic husband and settling down. My stock response was that I was looking for an unattached, rich, young farmer - a rather rare commodity in the vicinity.

Many of the younger women of my own generation had small children and did not work in the fish-factory. It took me longer to get to meet them. It was actually a few weeks before I began to see mothers and young children outside, when the weather began to improve. I gradually got to meet such women at the village dances, in the shop or their parents' homes. The post office was at the opposite end of the village from the house in which I stayed. I made a point of walking there every afternoon to send off or ask for letters. This gave me a chance to bump into people on the way.

It was the teenagers who were most shy of me, in part because I had become associated with their parents' generation but also because a doctoral student seemed to be such a remote being. In Iceland such a degree is not embarked upon until people are in their 30s; that I was doing one at my age made me seem even more distanced from them.

I got to know most men through their wives, girlfriends or mothers. The sexual division of labour in the factory



meant that I did not have any great contact with them at work, with the exception of the floor manager and quality control inspector. I was somewhat careful in my approach to the young men of the village. As the nickname (the whorehouse) of the factory house in the village where I had worked the previous summer implied, foreign women factory workers have acquired a reputation as fair game. Iceland has a reputation for very relaxed attitudes towards sexuality: I am told that even the Swedes talk of 'Icelandic marriage'. However, this extends really no further than heterosexuality within a reasonably established and acknowledged relationship. Couples aged from about 16 years upwards will be assumed to have a sexual relationship and the birth of a child causes no stigma - as long as the father is known<sup>10</sup>. Most people do not marry until the birth of at least one child and when they can afford to set up a separate household (see Björnsson, op.cit., Tomasson, 1976). Attitudes towards promiscuity, one-parent families and homosexuality<sup>11</sup> are not so nearly as tolerant.

I was probably both right and wrong to be circumspect in my approach to men in the village, as several events and the amount of talk concerning the foreign women in Fróneyri showed. On one occasion I was visiting the 'Australians' in the fish-factory house. A number of young men from the village were there, including one newly home from a fishing trip. He did not know of me and assumed I was one of the

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10. This is extremely important. In one instance I knew of, blood tests were taken to establish paternity. In this case there was a degree of moral censure because the baby was not conceived within a settled relationship.

11. As I was leaving Iceland newspapers reported the setting up of the first Gay Rights Association.

'Australians'. He was making asides about us, 'safe' in the knowledge that we would not understand. The other young men were egging him on, knowing that I did understand; an uncomfortable conspiracy of me and them against the other women and the young man. I put a stop to it by revealing that I understood. Once when I came down to breakfast after going to the dance the previous night, my landlord asked jocularly whether I had 'got a man' the previous night. Before I could answer my landlady said "Don't be silly, Maja is English, she's not like that". For her and many of the older people in the village the image of the English was of a rather straightlaced nation. Some women anthropologists may have to maintain an image of virginity: I had it thrust upon me.

However, something which happened well into my time in the village finally confirmed how delicate relationships can be and that the process of learning about a culture continues, even though you may feel you have begun to 'settle in'. After a dance I accepted a lift from the village hall to my front door, a matter of a few hundred yards. As I got out the driver, a middle-aged man, repeatedly asked me not to tell anyone, especially his wife, about the lift. His very obvious concern surprised and shocked me. It was only when I thought about it later that I could understand how, what was to me a simple favour from a man who was old enough to be my father, could have meant trouble. By this time I was known in the village not as a stereotyped Englishwoman, but as an individual with my faults and virtues and I was liked by many, especially those of the age group to which this man belonged. I had learnt that there was a lot of gossip in the village about relation-

ships, incomes and who did what during and after dances. This was the crucial factor, the lift took place after a dance when a lot of alcohol had been drunk.

An Icelandic friend once said "We don't make jokes about sex but about drink". As an indication of one of the main areas of concern in Icelandic society this comment was very telling. If the Icelandic attitude towards drink can be summed up in one phrase it is "fascinating evil". Its importation and sale is a State monopoly and it is available legally only in the State-run drink stores and hotels and restaurants. As a legacy from an earlier period of prohibition, beer is outlawed and only spirits and wines are available, except that home-brew beer kits are sold in the shops. The price is kept very high and there is only a minimal differential between spirits and wines<sup>12</sup>. The result is that there is very little relaxed social drinking. Many people are teetotal and even those who do drink rarely serve it in the home. Although this is changing as more Icelanders travel abroad most people would only serve a couple of glasses of sherry on special occasions like a birthday or at New Year. The more usual pattern of drinking is to buy a bottle and consume the lot. As there are no pubs and drink is largely excluded from the home, drinking usually takes place at the village dances when there is a lot of drunkenness. Even in a small village like Fróneyri there had to be a couple of bouncers to deal with the aggressive or morose drunks.

The restrictions on availability, lack of social areas for drinking such as pubs and moral disapproval means that people go further outside society to do their drinking:

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12. Spirits cost about £20 per bottle and wines not a lot less when I was in Iceland.

the old men to the sheephouses and the young people into the countryside. Both those who do and those who do not touch alcohol, equate drinking with getting drunk, losing control and the worst coming out in people. The lift in the car was given after a dance, when there is an expectation that people may act in abnormal ways. Hence the man's anxiety that I should not talk about this favour in case of village gossip.

I did not have privileged access to male areas of life as some have suggested is possible for women anthropologists (Riesman, forward xvi to Bowen, 1964). The job I had in the factory and the work I did in the home placed me within the female sphere of Icelandic life. I did worry at times about not having enough contact with men but a number of factors prevented me from participating in the male areas of life. Gender, age and unwillingness to acquire a disreputable image meant that I could not join in the old men's drinking sessions in the sheephouses. I could just possibly have got a job in another village on a boat as a cook or line baiter. (This was not possible in Fróneyri because of the small number of boats). However, I decided that tossing on a small boat way out on the ocean with hordes of exhausted, hungry fishermen was no place to learn mass-catering Icelandic style. Line-baiting is quite simply dirty, dangerous and disgusting (a woman friend did do it) - I just could not contemplate it. My lingering guilt began to dissolve as I realised that I was caught in my own sexism - worrying about not knowing about the male side of things. Would, I wondered, a male anthropologist have similar anxieties about not doing table work in the fish-factory, would they even have been expected to do housework,

would they worry about their lack of notes on spring cleaning? I was a woman anthropologist doing research explicitly on women. My own capabilities and the position of women in the society meant that certain areas of the society were debarred or would have entailed an effort which I was not prepared to make. Information about fishing had to come from conversations with men and women who had experienced it: not direct, personal participation.

As well as working in the factory<sup>13</sup> and doing housework I participated in the summer hay harvest and sheep round-ups. I went to the dances and film shows in the village hall and in time got invited to celebrations like birthdays, wedding anniversaries, confirmation parties and the church choir outing. I attended church services but not in any sense because this was expected; the majority of people did not go to church. I wanted to see the service in May when the children of 14 years old were confirmed. Rather than 'pop up' at that service I established a habit of church attendance. There was a bonus in that I discovered hymn-singing to be the best way of improving my Icelandic pronunciation.

I did very little interviewing of people with notebook in hand. When I did begin asking people if I could come and talk to them I found I was directed to "so and so who knows much more than me". I usually followed these directions rather than impose myself on people. If people were unwilling to be interviewed I was deflected rather than given a direct refusal. In interviews I concentrated on discussing with people the history of the village, their own life histories,

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13. Icelandic students have to work to help towards the cost of their education so no contradiction was seen in my doing so.



Figure v Haymaking: Scything The Grass



Figure vi Haymaking: Raking The Grass





Figure vii My Last Day In The Fish-factory

the names of the places in the fjord and folk tales associated with them. I learnt that there had been a financial scandal in the village the year before I arrived, and some people had thought I had chosen Fróneyri because of the notoriety it had acquired. I did not bring up current problems and disputes when I was interviewing people. That sort of information was gathered informally in daily conversations. Some people did take on the role of informing or instructing me. For instance, one woman offered to help me with the language. After she had listened to me read aloud for half an hour or so, we would converse, discussing everything from Icelandic history to contemporary politics and the situation and events in the village.

Rarely at the time or since have I thought of, or referred to the people of Fróneyri as "my informants". The extractive and possessive relationship that the phrase implies simply does not seem appropriate to describe the relationships that became established. However, there is something of a contradiction because although I thought of the people as those I knew, worked with, or was friends with, I was being informed by them and gaining, if not extracting, information. Although I was reciprocating in terms of giving my labour, time and interest I worried because the situation was unequal in that I was writing everything down; taking something from the relationships which others were not. My concern for the morality of what I was doing deepened as I came to know some of the people well, and in the nature of friendship, talked with them about their personal problems and experiences.



This dimension of their work, whether it is labelled as moral, ethical or political, must always be of concern to those who engage in participant-observation because of the greater or lesser degree of covertness that this strategy entails. I had been able, unlike some anthropologists, to say what I was, but I could not hide behind this, because in the full sense I had not conveyed to the people what I was doing. I believed that by putting myself in the position of living with people, not presenting myself as an expert and consequently being instructed, told off, making mistakes and getting teased there was an essentially democratic element to what I was doing, missing in research, which entails administering questionnaires and then returning to the haven of a distant office. This did not resolve my doubts. At the time it was one conversation which helped me carry on and not become completely lost in my moral doubts. One evening I was talking to Guðrún, the woman with whom I lived. She suddenly switched the conversation and started talking about one of the 'Australians' who had worked in the village some years previously. This woman had worked there for some time and picked up some Icelandic. Guðrún said

"she kept a diary and knew a lot of what went on in Fróneyri, although she never talked about what she knew."

I responded that I was sure she did know a lot and of course it was a bad thing to gossip. Nothing more was said and the conversation took a different course. I am absolutely certain that Guðrún knew exactly what she was doing by dropping that into the conversation. For me it was the liberating relief. It was not a signal for me to launch

at length into revealing what I was doing and the doubts I had. Guðrún had mentioned it implicitly and it had to stay at that level. That one person at least was aware of what I was doing, trusted me (with the injunction of not gossiping) was enough at that time, in the intensity of the situation, to help me through the moral problems I felt.

#### 1.5.4. Reykjavík

I spent two winters in the capital. During the first I concentrated on language studies. I also re-established contact with people I had met the previous summer and got to know my way around the various libraries. It was during the second winter that I actually collected material in the University Library, Library of the History of Icelandic Women and Manuscript Library.

The way in which I learnt about the Rauðsokkahreyfing feminist movement contrasted very much with my experience in Fróneyri. It was much more episodic, in that I attended their Saturday morning meetings and various events such as a debate with the Maoist party and celebration of International Women's Day, in the five months before I returned to England. To learn about the setting up of the movement and the organisation of The Women's Day Off I interviewed some of those who had been involved. Another difference was that I was treated as an expert, on Anthropology, Feminism in England and to a degree on women in Icelandic villages. The feminists were concerned that they were very Reykjavík based, and looked to me to provide knowledge about rural life. I was asked to give a talk about Fróneyri but felt

unable to do so at that stage. There had been insufficient time for me to produce anything but the most superficial analysis which I thought would hardly be news to them. Instead I gave a talk on Anthropology and Feminism.

#### 1.6. Writing up and the Structure of this Thesis

Most personal anthropological accounts end with the return from the field. As Crick noted (op.cit.:18,27,28) there are very few discussions of the production of written texts. The experiences I have had while analysing my fieldnotes are largely irretrievable because I did not keep a diary which would record the growth of my analysis. However, there was one breakthrough which had major significance. It is described here because it determined the structure of this thesis.

When I returned from Iceland I had collected information on most of the areas I had specified in my original research proposal; that is the historical and modern feminist movements, The Day Off and life in a village. In addition I had a complete historical census record from Fróneyri and masses of odd notes on all aspects of Iceland past and present. I could not see how a thesis, with a coherent and pleasing structure, could come out of what seemed to be a very disparate body of data.

It was only when I wrote a first draft of the chapter on domestic work (see chapter five) that a structure for the thesis began to emerge. In considering housework I developed an analysis based on the categories of invisible and visible work. I began to see that these categories could be applied to what I set out to do in Iceland. The whole of feminist

Anthropology can be seen as rendering visible the position of women in society, which was largely overlooked in male-dominated Anthropology. My particular study and the subjects I had learnt about, which seemed so diverse, formed an organic whole if understood in terms of invisibility, visibility and the struggle to become visible.

The following four chapters comprise the part of the thesis called Invisible Women. I begin with a brief description of the history of Iceland until 1800. I had not anticipated there would be as much history, as it is usually understood, in this thesis<sup>14</sup>. However, like other anthropologists who have written about Iceland, I found it to be a major part of my work. A difference in my work is that I have not concentrated on the Viking Age. It was the historical process from the nineteenth century onwards which primarily interested me. Chapter two, on the earlier history, is therefore in one respect an introduction which leads to that analysis in Chapter three.

The other reason for writing about Iceland's early history is it has such importance as a metaphor for Iceland as a whole in later times. It is a metaphor which has been used, it could be said appropriated, by others - Victorian travellers rhapsodising about the Saga sites, Nazis seeking the fount of 'Aryan culture' and even anthropologists seeking to establish continuities across some 1200 years. By Icelanders themselves, the image of the 'Golden Age' before the 'Fall' prior to Norwegian and Danish rule, was used during the nationalist struggle, and the example

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14. In a sense all ethnographies are historical, which is why I have tended to use the past tense rather than the 'ethnographic present'.

of the strong women of the Sagas has been evoked in the feminist movements.

In what is undeniably a small, relatively powerless and economically vulnerable country, the ancient society which had a republican, devolved system of administration and justice based on the system of assemblies, the literature which came from that society and the language which has changed little and links the people directly to their origins, provides a powerful charter for their integrity as a culture and nation today. National and personal history (expressed most obviously in the great interest in and knowledge of genealogies) imposes itself in a way I had not encountered in my own culture. It is not, I would suggest, simply because extensive records are available that anthropologists have been drawn to explore Icelandic history; it is also a response to the pervasive sense of the past within the culture today. I have tried in an admittedly compressed account, to go behind the metaphor, to bring out that the ancient society was stratified not egalitarian, there was subordination of women and the processes whereby the people became a poor peasantry began before colonial rule.

In one sense the focus narrows in Chapter three because it concentrates on Fróneyri through an analysis of the census data from the 1820s onwards. But it is illustrative of the process whereby the whole of Iceland changed into an industrial economy and the consequences this had for Icelandic women.

Chapters four and five consider the dual role Icelandic women have today as waged and unwaged workers. These chapters are appropriately placed in the part of the thesis called

Invisible Women because they consider the mundane workaday life. They are not topics which other anthropologists who have studied in Iceland have considered. Domestic work has become a subject for scholarly debate in recent years, but in the field of Maritime Anthropology, the role of women in fishing communities has received scant attention in comparison to the studies of fishermen.<sup>15</sup> In addition women's role in contemporary society has tended to be ignored in Iceland itself.

This was the key rallying point in the publicity for The Women's Day Off which is the subject of part two of the thesis entitled Visible Women. Icelandic women made themselves visible by stopping doing what they normally did and collecting together in meetings across the country. By doing this they ensured at least for one day, that they could not be overlooked.

The last part of the thesis, Becoming Visible, charts women's political action in Icelandic society. Both the historical and contemporary women's movements are considered. Parts two and three could have been reversed with the thesis culminating in The Day Off. This would have created a false impression. The Day Off was not an end point but an event which punctuated a continuing process. There were very ambivalent feelings about it at the time and its meaning is open to re-interpretation and evaluation, to which my analysis is a contribution. To end the thesis by looking at a continuing process is much more

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15. Exceptions are Holtedahl, 1976; Porter, 1982 and a section in Thompson et al, 1983.

appropriate and true to the society which it concerns.

### 1.7. Marginality and Centrality

In going to a small island to carry out fieldwork I appeared to be following in a venerable anthropological tradition. The Icelanders may not be as unknown as the Trobrianders but considering how close they are to Britain: the links (and disputes) we have had with them, there is great ignorance here about that country. Ever since I have been writing to Iceland, from the 1960s, I have been asked in post offices "Is that in Europe?". It has regularly been assumed that I was studying Eskimoes. Icelanders, recognising this ignorance, make jokes about living in eight-storey igloos and living in the lifts when the ice melts in summer. But I did not choose Iceland as the most isolated place in Europe, my icy version of a desert island; it had importance to me long before I did Anthropology.

Geographically Iceland is on the margins of Europe and it seems to fall into a hole in most people's conceptual map of the world. Even though I worked in Europe it seemed that I was perceived to have been somewhere exotic. It may be that the 'ice and fire' image explains why people found it almost quixotic for me to go there. I wonder if others who have studied in Europe have been faced so often with an equivalent of the question I have continually had to answer; "Why Iceland?".

Yet Iceland has never been completely isolated from the rest of Europe (and of course there were links to North America long before Columbus). Thule - possibly Iceland, was known to the ancient Greeks, it was a sacred

place for Celtic hermits and a refuge for Vikings from Scandinavia and the British Isles. For centuries the country was an exploited colony of Denmark, and the British, French, Spanish and Germans fished around Iceland's coasts. During World War II its strategic position in the mid-Atlantic meant that it was taken over, occupied, as the Icelanders speak of it. An exercise in the bible of Icelandic grammar expresses the Icelandic view succinctly:

"Þjóðverjar hertóku Danmörku, en Englendingur Ísland 1940. Næstu sumar báðu Íslendingar Bandaríkjamenn um vernd sína; þeir komu til landsins í júlí 1941".

(Einarsson, 1945:275-6)

"The Germans occupied Denmark, and the English Iceland in 1940. The next summer the Icelanders invited the Americans to defend them; they came to the country in July 1941).

Although the Icelanders supported the Allies during the war and kept Britain supplied with fish by making the dangerous voyages in small boats, the uninvited British takeover was a blow to national pride. Since that time, Iceland an independent nation from 1944, has been a member of N.A.T.O. They have no armed forces but allow the U.S.A. to maintain a base on the island. A recent newspaper report suggested that the Pentagon would like to base cruise missile launchers at Keflavík (Sunday Times, 18.12.83). The base, the presence of which has caused controversy for decades, is a reminder that Iceland is in one respect as integrated as anywhere else in this world.

Not surprisingly the Icelanders do not conceive of themselves in the same terms as others have. At its most chauvinistic there is the view that the language and



literature contributed something central to European culture. Economically the country has never been entirely isolated and is dependent today on international trade. The high standard of living is maintained by the sale of fish and fish products which are about 80% of exports by value. The economy is extremely vulnerable to international influences, especially the value of the dollar because America is their chief export market. Their other resources are limited. Wool, wool products, lamb and horses are exported. Food, clothing, consumer durables, oil and much else is imported. There are great energy resources in the form of geo-thermal energy but this is mainly used for domestic space heating. There are periodic rumours of oil off the coast. If it exists, exploiting it will mean a greater capital investment and technological advance than even the North Sea required.

Culturally and economically there are strong links with Scandinavia and Britain. Students regularly travel to both these areas for their post-graduate training. A shopping trip to Glasgow or Copenhagen and a holiday in the Mediterranean has been a feature of Icelandic life for over a decade. Thousands of tourists now travel each year to the island. The Icelandic State takes its international obligations seriously, has received refugees from Korea, Vietnam and Uganda and contributed to Third World development by, for instance, sending experts to advise on fishing techniques. All this does not mean that Icelanders do not emphasise their unique features, such as the landscape, their naming system and social mores (there cannot be many countries which proclaim in a tourist leaflet an illegitimacy rate of 50%). To acknowledge that Iceland is less marginalised

than outsiders may believe does not deny its specificity.

This study could be viewed as one of a uniquely marginalised society and I have indeed described the very particular features of Icelandic life. However, the development of the Icelandic economy into a fully industrialised one, with the concomitant changes in occupational and household structure and the role of women, is familiar in many other societies. The thesis focuses on the position of women in society, a topic which is now recognised to be of academic and political significance. To that extent this work is not only a report on the other but reflects back on ourselves.

INVISIBLE WOMEN

## CHAPTER TWO - AN OUTLINE HISTORY AD 874-1800

### 2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of Icelandic history. The social system and economy of the Commonwealth period are outlined. A description is given of the role of women and later interpretations of their position are discussed. The history of Iceland from the thirteenth century onwards is then chronicled. Towards the end of the chapter, data which refers specifically to Fróneyri is analysed to illustrate social conditions, household structure and the domestic economy. Lastly, the gender-related division of labour in the eighteenth century is considered.

### 2.2. The Settlement and Commonwealth Period AD 874-1262

There is evidence from the records of Celtic monks<sup>1</sup> and a few Icelandic place names<sup>2</sup>, that Irish anchorites lived in Iceland prior to the arrival of the Vikings. The identity of the first Viking voyager to the island is not certain, but the first permanent settlers are thought to have been Ingólfur Arnarson and his foster-brother Hjörleifur who arrived with their households in about 874. In the following decades migration from the Norse settlements in Scotland and Ireland and from Norway

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1. Ádamnan: Vita S. Columbae  
 Dicuil: Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae

2. For example the island of Papey which derives its name from the Irish word for priest/monk.

were stimulated by the socio-political changes taking place there. In particular the unification of Norway, under the sovereignty of Harald Haarfagre, led to many local chieftains leaving that country. Between 20,000 and 70,000 people are estimated to have migrated to Iceland by 930 (Hastrup, 1982:156).

The two twelfth century books, Landnámabók and Íslendingabók, provide accounts of this period, although they are no longer accepted as complete or entirely accurate descriptions (Magnússon, 1977:29). However, they are valuable sources of information particularly Landnámabók which gives details of some 400 of the most prominent settlers, who came with their households and freeborn followers. These people took possession of large tracts of land and divided it among their followers. When land became scarce (the centre of the island is uninhabitable) a rule was instituted whereby a man could claim the land he and his company could carry fire around in one day. A woman could take the land she could lead a two year old heifer around in one day.<sup>3</sup> It does seem that women could hold land in their own right and one of the first settlers was Auður, given the epithet 'deep-minded' (Gjerset, 1922:24) or 'deepwealthy' (Foote and Wilson, 1970:55), the widow of King Olaf of Dublin. Auður migrated to Iceland with slaves, servants, kin and 20 freemen (Pálsson and Edwards, 1972:51) and she took land in the west of Iceland sufficient to support 80 farmers (Foote and Wilson, *ibid*). However,

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3. Presumably a heifer goes slower than a running man so it would seem that women could claim a smaller area of land than men.

women unless the sole heir, were excluded from inheriting land until the thirteenth century when the law stated that they were entitled to half a son's share.

During the Settlement period<sup>4</sup> there was no centralised political or legal authority in Iceland. The leading settlers and their descendants had de facto power over their areas. Gjerset described the socio-political organisation thus:

"As no one in these new settlements could claim any rank of superiority, the chieftains remained wholly independent and contrived to rule their adherents and subordinates according to the most ancient local custom. The new colony was at first not a state, but a group of chieftaincies without any tie of union under a central government."

(op.cit.:30)

The observation of lack of superiority only refers to the relationship between the chieftains. There was of course the social differentiation of slaves, freemen and chieftains. A Norse creation myth, preserved in the eddaic poem Rígsþula and alluded to in Völuspá, describes how humankind came to be thus ranked. After sharing bed and board with the visiting god Ríg, Edda and Ái (great-grandmother and great-grandfather) had a son þræll (slave) who lived with þír (drudge) and had children called Sluggard, Lout, Cinder-wench, Slattern etc. After a similar visit Amma (grandmother) and Afi (grandfather) had Karl (freeman) who married Snær (daughter-in-law) who produced the children called Yeoman, Smith, Maiden, Bride, Dame etc. The visitation of Móðir

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4. Historians conventionally divide early Icelandic history into two major periods: the Settlement period from about 870 until the founding of the Alþing in 930, and the Commonwealth period which lasted until the union with Norway in 1292.

(mother) and Faðir (father) resulted in Jarl (chieftain/earl) who married Erna (the efficient) and had three sons, the youngest of whom, Kon Ungur, was taught by Ríg and was a king - Kon Ungur = konungur = king. (Hollander, 1928: 141-9).

In Iceland during the Commonwealth period, the position of King was never occupied and social and economic changes resulted in the disappearance of slaves, creation of a category of freed slaves and growth in the number of tenants, as opposed to freeholders (Hastrup, 1979; Jóhannesson, 1974: 344-358). The growth of the population and consequent diminution in the size of land holdings was the major factor which brought about the end of slavery. Farms were worked by family members only, or it was found to be cheaper to hire freeborn workers than to own slaves. Additional factors were that the supply of slaves decreased as Viking raids became less frequent and the spread of Christian ideas discouraged slavery and ruled out infanticide. Slaves' children could no longer be exposed, which contributed to slavery becoming increasingly uneconomic. Freed slaves did not constitute a self-perpetuating group because their children were born free, but there were special laws concerning this social category and their status was not entirely equal to that of the freeborn.

It was also the increasing scarcity of land and its rise in value which led to the growth of a large number of tenants. Freed slaves and others who wished to set up their own households were no longer granted land by freeholders and could not afford to buy it. The only alternative was to rent land. As wealthy individuals and the Church

increased their landholdings, the classes of tenant farmers and poor cotters (hjáleigumenn, þurrabúðarmenn) increased throughout the Commonwealth period and later centuries.

The people who migrated to Iceland were followers of the Norse gods in the main, although some were Christians. The chieftains were not only the holders of economic and political power in their areas, they also had religious authority in their role of goði (priest). Religious and secular authority became combined in the role of goði (pl. goðar) who was supposed to maintain order in his goðorð. This politico-religious entity was one of the bases of Iceland's social organisation. Hastrup described the goðorð as:

".... a curious mixture of private property and public office, and as such they could be bought, sold, acquired through force, or inherited according to the circumstances."

(1982:148)

While the chieftains ultimately derived their position from the ownership of land, the goðorð was not initially a geographically bounded unit. Although obliged to attach themselves to a goði, freemen did not necessarily give their allegiance to the nearest local goði, but to a distant one if this was to their advantage. Women could technically own a goðorð but not act as a goði.

In some areas an assembly (þing), presided over by the goði, met to settle disputes. Eventually a need for a national legislature and judicial system was felt, so in 927 Úlflijótur travelled to south-west Norway to study the law there in order to draw up a code, suitably adapted, for Iceland. His fosterbrother Grím Geitsko was delegated to find a site for the national assembly (Alþing). The first



Alþing was held in 930 at the dramatically beautiful place now known as þingvellir. The Alþing had legislative and juridical functions but no executive power. Although often referred to as the first parliament because all freemen could attend, there was only a limited degree of democracy. Decision-making power was invested in the 36 (later 39) goðar. After 965 the juridical system was changed and extended so that the whole country was divided into four Quarters, each with its quota of local assemblies. It was here that justice was enacted at the spring meeting; cases only being taken to the Alþing if not settled locally. Between 1004-9 a higher court, the Fifth Court (Fimmtardómur) was instituted at the Alþing to try cases arising between the Quarters.<sup>5</sup>

As well as this island-wide system of assemblies, the country was divided into communes (hreppar). These consisted of a minimum of 20 tax-payers and were concerned with matters of husbandry such as arranging the sheep round-up, mutual insurance against loss of buildings and stock, and poor relief.

### 2.2.1. The Economy

Despite the dramatic picture of events in the Sagas, most of the Icelanders spent their time obtaining their subsistence from the land and sea. The climate was milder than today, so grain could be grown. There were some trees for timber and fuel, although peat was also important for heating. Animal husbandry was the most

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5. Full accounts of the establishment and modifications of the Icelandic juridico-political system are given in Gjerset, 1922:32-48; Jóhannesson, 1974:35-83; Magnusson, 1977: 12-25.

important aspect of agriculture with sheep, cows, horses, chickens, goats and pigs being raised. The sea and coastline provided fish and seabirds exploited for their meat, eggs, and in the case of ducks, eiderdown. Iceland was not an entirely self-sufficient subsistence economy and external trading was probably of more importance than internal, because poor cross-country communications hampered the latter. The Icelanders imported timber, flour, iron, copper, weapons, tar, wine, beer, wax and honey. They exported wool and homespun cloth (vaðmál), sheepskins, pelts, meat, tallow, butter, cheese, train-oil (derived from whales and sharks), fish, falcons, and sulphur (Gjerset, op.cit.:80). Vaðmál was the most important export and Simpson commented:

"The survival of a farming household depended largely on the cattle, but its prosperity (and that of the Icelandic community as a whole) depended on the sheep."

(1967:63)

It would perhaps be equally to the point to say that the society depended on the women who wove the cloth.

From the end of the twelfth century onwards the Icelanders lost control over their trade with other countries. The fundamental reason was that they were no longer ship-owners. Ships could not be built in Iceland because of the lack of timber and it became too expensive to have them built abroad. Trade with the island passed almost entirely into the hands of Norwegian merchants and the profits were lost to the Icelanders. It was their vulnerability to foreign merchants which was to contribute so much to Iceland's exploitation in the following centuries.

### 2.2.2. The Saga Age and End of the Commonwealth

The period 930-1030 is usually designated the Saga Age, since the Sagas, while written at a later date, are largely set in this period. The events of this area, at least as far as they affected the chieftains and their households, are described in works such as Njála and Eyrbyggja Saga. Turner discussed the problem of reading the Sagas as historical texts, coming to the view that they were valuable sources of information on Icelandic social structure and economics and could be analysed as a set of social dramas which portray the tensions and conflicts of the time (1971: 353). As Durrenberger (1982:24) noted, Turner's identification of the Sagas as social dramas is somewhat redundant because they were written as dramatic accounts of past events.

Gjerset characterised the Saga Age as one in which the conflict between the legal system and custom of personal private revenge became acute:

"The chieftains, who were governed by the narrow self-interest characteristic of a privileged upper class, shooed away every new idea and clung to the past with a veneration which made Icelandic society unprogressive... This is apparent as well in the people's attitude to their own laws and institutions as in their private intercourse. With a highly developed jurisprudence and a well-organised system of courts they nevertheless failed to maintain social order and to administer justice with efficient impartiality... Two systems may therefore be said to have existed side by side; that of law acting through the courts, and that of custom operating through personal revenge."

(op.cit.:46-7)

Hastrup (1977) took the view that this tension, and the contradiction between Paganism and Christianity, were inherent in the society from its beginning and as external and internal pressures grew, they led to the demise of the Commonwealth. Babcock (1978) disputed this analysis, suggesting that there was originally no contradiction resulting from the þings' lack of executive power. Rather, the courts were an arbitration system which decided the legitimate retribution a successful plaintiff could take. For Babcock it was only in later centuries, when the society had moved towards being a feudal system with power in the hands of a few families, that the basis of the Alþing's legitimacy was eroded and it became incapable of settling disputes within the country.

A potential conflict between the Pagan and Christian factions was avoided in 1000 when it was decided at the Alþing that Christianity should be the official religion of the country. Significant concessions on the private observance of Pagan practices were made. A period of peace followed until about 1118 when the strife of the Sturlung Age broke out. This period is named after the family which played the major part in this time of virtual civil war. It proved impossible to settle the disputes internally, so in 1292 Iceland voluntarily entered into a union with the Norwegian Crown (Gamli Sáttmáli).

### 2.3. The Position of Women

In his An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga, Turner makes the following observation concerning women's position within the mediæval society:

"In the case of the women who are incorporated into patrilineal core-groups by virilocal marriage and spend most of their post-marital lives in their husbands' communities, rising to the status of matriarchs, concern for the honour of these local particularistic groups becomes a ruling passion. They are not concerned with the wider groupings such as District, Quarter or Iceland, but foment local conflicts with their sharp taunting tongues."

(op.cit.:368-9)

As Foote and Wilson (op.cit.:111) stated there is a pre-occupation in the Sagas with "proud, vindictive women". They are shown as working through their husbands, brothers, sons and servants to achieve their ends.

Women were excluded from the arena of legitimate political action and in comparison to men were legal minors. Grágás, the law of the Commonwealth period, stated that a man could choose his own home, come of age, when 16. A woman had a guardian until 20 if unmarried and upon marriage came under her husband's control and could do no more than 1/2 oz. of silver's worth of trading in a year. They could not prosecute a lawsuit without a male representative but could give witness by undergoing an ordeal. This was for women, taking a stone from a cauldron of boiling water ketiltak (Foote and Wilson, op.cit.:377). While widows had the right to represent themselves at a þing, Sigurðardóttir's view is that in practice they sent a male delegate (1975)<sup>6</sup>. In any event, neither they nor other women could be appointed as a judge because the qualification was to be a man of at least 20 years (Magnússon, op.cit.:14).

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6. Anna Sigurðardóttir's work Verkakonur á Íslandi í ellefu hundrúðum ar was originally given at a meeting of the K.R.F.I. (Woman's Rights Association of Iceland) in 1973, and later broadcast on the radio in March 1975. She kindly let me read and quote from the manuscript, which is held in The Library of the History of Icelandic Women, Reykjavík.

It was customary, but not obligatory, for a woman's consent to be asked when an approach of marriage was made. A marriage was finalised, and children legitimated, by the payment of bride price which initially seems to have stayed with the woman's family but in later times was hers. Dowries, again customary but not obligatory, belonged to the bride and she also received a morning-gift from her husband after the wedding night. Exposure of babies was practiced and it was the father who decided whether the newborn infant should live or die. Wealthy men could and did take mistresses and there were laws governing the inheritance rights of bastard children. A woman's adultery was a crime. Divorce appears to have been relatively easy, involving a simple procedure, for both men and women in the pre-Christian area, but after the conversion became progressively more difficult. A widow, of whatever age, seems to have had more control over her property and choice concerning remarriage.

Women's proper sphere was the domestic one and here the women of the chieftain families had considerable responsibilities, running large households. Such women had numerous domestic skills and were especially renowned for midwifery and medicine.

Foote and Wilson are cautious about ascribing any important religious role to women:

"Women doubtless played a large part in domestic cults, but since in this they were probably only fulfilling the duties of senior members of households everywhere, they would not be given any special name."

(op.cit.:94)

An indication of the role of women in Viking religious rites is given in the account, written by Ibn Fadlan an Arab

traveller, of the funeral of a Swedish chieftain of the Volga region in 922. The ritual sacrifice of a female slave, part of the ceremony, was presided over by a woman called the Angel of Death (Simpson, op.cit.:196-9).

Belief in the Pagan religion seems already to have been in decline by the time of the colonisation of Iceland (Jóhannesson, op.cit.:120). The Icelandic literature, written at a later period and influenced by Christian beliefs, gives few descriptions of Pagan practices. Priestesses (gyðja) are mentioned in the Sagas but little is known about them. Jóhannesson (ibid.:59) considered that they would not have been permitted to discharge the secular functions of the goðar. In several sagas there are references to female seers and one of the eddaic poems, a vision of the creation, destruction and recreation of the world, is entitled Völuspá (The Song of the Seeress). But psychic abilities were by no means solely attributed to women.

Only men of course were ordained in the Christian Church but it is known that some women had a place within religious institutions. Two nunneries were founded<sup>7</sup> and in the late Commonwealth period there were learned and artistic women such as Ingunn Arnorsdóttir who studied and taught at the cathedral school of Hólar, and Margrét, who carved a crozier and embroidered the altar cloths for Skálholt cathedral.

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7. Anna Sigurðardóttir (personal communication) suggested that after the establishment of convents these provided a setting for some women to develop a culture relatively less dominated by men.

### 2.3.1. The Portrayal of Women in the Literature

Babcock cautions that in using the literature for an understanding of the earliest period of Icelandic history, it must be acknowledged that the texts were written at a later date than the period they describe. She suggests:

"... that the proper object of analysis is the 'idea of early Iceland held c.1200' and not a real 'early Iceland' which could be seen as preceding 'Saga Iceland'."

(op.cit.:181)

Similar care has to be taken when reading through the literature for its portrayal of women. Only a very small proportion of the Histories, Eddas and Sagas have been attributed to individual authors - all male, but there seems to be an implicit assumption among scholars that all the literature was written by men. To paraphrase Babcock, it would seem that the proper object of study is the idea of women held by men.

If only Hávamál, the eddaic poem which encapsulates the Viking philosophy of life, were to be considered, it would have to be supposed that this view was generally misogynistical. For instance:

"A wench's words let no wise man trust,  
nor trust the troth of a woman, for on  
whirling wheel their hearts are shaped,  
and fickle and fitful their minds."

(Hollander, op.cit.:31)

and

"Praise a wife when she has been cremated...  
a virgin after she has been married."

(Foote and Wilson,  
op.cit.:112)

There was a law which forbade the telling of love poems to women; so weak were they thought to be. Outlawry was the



punishment for transgression. Hávamál comments on the supposed light-mindedness of women, ever susceptible to flattery.

"Fairly shall speak, nor spare his gifts  
 who will win a woman's love, -  
 shall praise the looks of the lovely maid  
 he who flatters will win the fair."

(Hollander, op.cit.:32)

Hávamál is just one poem and the difficulty which arises in this context, is that the literature is so extensive, even if only the Eddas the Family Sagas are considered. Here just two themes will be discussed: the portrayal of aristocratic women and those of other classes.

The first thing to state is that many aristocratic women feature in the literature. They are, as Wax (1969:29) noted, described as individuals with their own personalities. They are shown to be people who had to make decisions and act, but their choices were structured by their position in society. Women such as Brýnhildur and Guðrún in the heroic poems have to make choices between their brothers and husbands; which exemplifies the position of women who were not fully incorporated into their husbands' families and had to decide where their loyalty lay. In the Sagas there are women such as Bergþóra and Hallgerður whose quarrel is pivotal to the tragedy of Njála.

Turner (op.cit.:368-9) described these women as "unconcerned" with matters beyond the local level, but as already described they were excluded from full participation in the assemblies where conflicts were supposed to be brought and settled. The words Rosaldo wrote concerning male authority and female power can be applied very directly to the aristocratic women of the

## Saga Age:

"At the same time, of course, women themselves are far from helpless, and whether or not their influence is acknowledged, they exert important pressures on the social life of the group. In other words, in various circumstances male authority might be mitigated, and, perhaps rendered almost trivial, by the fact that women (through gossiping or yelling, playing sons against brothers, running the business, or refusing to cook) may have a good deal of informal influence and power."

(1974:21)

Their influence and indeed action is portrayed as "manipulative, disruptive, illegitimate" (Rosaldo, *ibid*). It is not, however, seen as unimportant, which Rosaldo also stated, because the Sagas are dramas where every action has consequence.

In Njála Bergþóra and Hallgerður are ultimately distinguished as symbols of womanhood by their loyalty to their husbands. Bergþóra chooses to die with Njál, sharing his death by burning with the words:

"I was given away to Njal young", said Bergþóra, "and I have promised him this, that we would both share the same fate."

(Dasent, 1911:237)

Hallgerður, in contrast, guarantees her husband's death by refusing him some of her hair to restring his bow, broken when defending himself against his attackers. This is her revenge for the slap in the face he once gave her.

Laxdæla Saga with its many strong female characters, sympathetically described, is often ascribed a 'feminine character' (Magnússon, *op.cit.*:87). That women's actions are forever bound up with men and will bring them sorrow is encapsulated in Guðrún's words when asked which man she had loved the most. "To him I was worst whom I loved most", was her reply.

These are the aristocratic women and there are only glimpses in the literature of women of other classes. The creation of the categories of women in Rígsþula has already been mentioned. Another Edda, Gróttasongur (The Mill Song), can be read as a description of the lot and resentment of servant women (Sigurðardóttir, 1980:11). It recounts the lament and eventual rebellion of the bondwomen, Fenja and Menja, against their master Fróði who set them endlessly to grind out peace and gold in a giant millstone. When the millstone is destroyed general havoc is wrought. In Laxdæla Saga the slave Melkorka plays a part. She, the daughter of an Irish king, vowed never to speak during her enslavement and so was thought to be dumb. Her subterfuge was discovered when she was found talking to her child<sup>8</sup>.

Under the law slaves had some rights - to get married, claim compensation if their kin were killed and accumulate property to buy their freedom, but basically they were the chattels of their owners. It is undeniable that in certain areas, such as marriage and divorce, women had legal rights comparable to men but this should not obscure the fact that in general the laws differentiated between men and women and those of the various classes. The penalty for sexual offences against women for instance, got progressively heavier depending on the status of the woman: a fine of three marks if she were a slave, three years expatriation if she were a freedwoman and outlawry in a case involving a freeborn woman (Hastrup, 1979:186).

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8. Melkorka was chosen as the name of a women's journal published between 1944 and 1962. The choice of title was of course highly significant.

### 2.3.2. The Position of Women - Interpretation and Re-interpretation

The many commentators (e.g. Tomasson, 1976:256; Wax, op.cit.:29) who wrote simply that women had high status among the Vikings were clearly referring to those of the chieftain families and not women of other classes. The Saga literature is overwhelmingly the story of these powerful families and does contain vivid portraits of individual women. This has largely structured the image of the position of women in Viking society held in later times; what is assumed to have been their uniquely high status is disproportionately emphasised. Whether these aristocratic women enjoyed greater liberty and rights than women of comparable status in other countries of mediæval Europe, or if this has been assumed in the absence elsewhere of such a large and celebrated body of literature, will only emerge as the retrieval of women's history (e.g. Carlé et al., 1980) continues.

Knowledge and re-examination of the past is not, though, solely the province of scholars. The evocation of ancient Iceland was an important part of the nineteenth century nationalist movement (Babcock, 1976:81), and in a similar way the image of women in mediæval Iceland has been significant in the suffrage and modern women's movements, Webster (1975) has put forward the idea that a concept of matriarchy, regardless of its empirical reality, has utility as a "vision of power". In just this way the images of the 'independent' women of Iceland's past have been used as a charter - to promote the idea that the position of women 'now' is not inevitable, and as icons - precursors of modern political action, e.g.

"The women of these Sagas are strong and independent.... Those women must be mentioned because they were the fore-runners of the women's movement in Iceland".

(Valdimarsdóttir, 1929:1-2)

Latterly the emphasis has shifted away from the aristocratic women, although they are still mentioned, to the unsung women of other classes, as the importance of women's work role became the dominant theme of the modern women's movement.

The process of re-interpreting the past also takes place at the local level. There is in existence an autobiography written by a man who was born in the parish of Fróneyri towards the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> One event he recounted concerned a woman who died on a mountain pass after visiting another district. Her baby's cries were heard and a search, by the local farmers was instigated at the urging of the priest. The woman's body was found and buried and the child was rescued, grew up and worked as a labourer until he died aged 20.

Some 400 years later I was told this story as a 'folk-tale' which explained the name of a topographical feature in the valley, that could be derived etymologically from a woman's name. The gloss given the story in this re-telling, was that it showed what a hard life women had had in the past because the dead woman had been a servant, tramping the country looking for work. In the autobiography the woman has a completely different name, was married and no explanation is given for her travels.

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9. The reference is not given to preserve the anonymity of the village today.

#### 2.4. The Loss of Independence

After the union with Norway in 1292 there was no immediate change in the chieftains' status or legal system. Twenty years later a new law code Jónsbók was introduced which abolished the chieftaincies and increased the power of the king and his representatives. From this time the Icelanders gradually lost their independence as the power of the Crown and Church waxed, through the acquisition of land and levying of taxes and tithes. From being a self-governing republic Iceland became an exploited colony. In 1354 for instance the king began leasing the island for three year periods to the highest bidder. He was appointed governor and allowed to collect taxes as best he could. There were isolated examples of resistance to the foreign domination, (e.g. the killing of the governor in 1362 and drowning of a foreign bishop in 1433) but in general the history of Iceland for the next few hundred years is a story of exploitation by first the Norwegians and then, after the Kalmar Act of Union in 1397, the Danes. The people were impoverished, lost title to the land and suffered from disease and the effects of natural disasters.

The fourteenth century opened with an event which preshadowed the calamities of the next hundred years. The volcano Hekla erupted in 1300, covering the south of the island with ash. This was followed by epidemics and in 1306 a winter so severe the seas were frozen until summer. More eruptions and earthquakes occurred and both people and animals died from disease. Trade was not disrupted for the first half of the century because the Norwegians

were anxious to continue the trade in dried cod. This was their monopoly and buffered them against the expansion of the Hanseatic League. In 1349 the Black Death devastated Norway and trading with Iceland diminished. The Icelandic people had become relatively less able to feed themselves during this century, neglecting agriculture as fish became a major export. This increased their vulnerability to the whims of colonial rule in later years.

Magnússon wrote:

"If the fourteenth century was bad for the Icelanders the fifteenth proved even more disastrous".

(op.cit.:10)

In the years 1402-4 it is estimated that up to two thirds of the population died from the Black Death. Danish rule became fully established, with foreign civil and religious officials being appointed. For a century trade with Iceland was a bone of contention to be (at times literally) fought over by Danish, German and English merchants. Then the Danish king leased Iceland to the city council of Copenhagen. The Reformation was rigorously enforced against the Icelanders' wishes by Christian III. During this episode the king's emissaries were murdered in 1539 and Bishop Jón Árason of Hólar was executed, with his two sons, in 1550. The Crown appropriated Church property, instituted a system of free labour on royal fishing boats for those who leased Crown land and enacted draconian new laws. Execution was the penalty for heresy, adultery (beheading for men and drowning for women) and robbery. Towards the end of the sixteenth century the environment again intervened with volcanic eruptions and bad winters. In 1602 a trade monopoly was granted to Danish merchants who exploited the nation for the next 150 years.

Writing of conditions in the sixteenth century, the historian Jónsson described housing conditions as very poor. The houses were made of turf, wood being scarce, through which the rain and wind came. Cobwebs, mildew and slime covered the walls and the floors were of trodden earth. Animals often shared the main room baðstofa with the people and little light penetrated the windows. These were kept small to preserve warmth because there was no heating (quoted in Gjerset, op.cit.:327).

The Danish trade monopoly enforced in 1602 heralded "a century and a half of inhuman economic oppression and almost constant misery." (Magnússon op.cit.:107). Raids by English, Spanish and Arab pirates ravaged the country. The most infamous attack was in 1627 when Algerian pirates raided the Vestmann Islands, enslaving 242 people and burning some 34 others. There were volcanic eruptions in 1618-19, 1625, 1636, 1660 and 1693; bad winters in 1695 and 1696.

## 2.5. Life in the Eighteenth Century

In the middle of the eighteenth century Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson were commissioned by the Danish king, under the auspices of the Academy of Science, to carry out a study of Iceland "relative to which only vague and imperfect ideas had hitherto prevailed" (preface to the first English edition 1805). In the years 1752 to 1757 the two men travelled to all parts of the island making observations on the geography, natural history and way of life of the people.



They noticed that on the whole, people of the coast were more unhealthy than those of the countryside because the former were so exposed to the cold and winds during fish work (1975:15). In the south they found the homes of the fisherfolk worse than others but they were better built in the north west, the area in which Fróneyri is located (ibid:16 and 91). The diet consisted of: milk products such as whey, curds, butter, cheese from sheep and cows; fish which was usually eaten dried or marinated rather than fresh; and meat usually smoked or pressed, eaten only on feast days. Vegetables were rarely eaten because they were not grown (the potato was not introduced until 1759 when it rapidly became a staple). Writing specifically of Vestfirðir (the north west), the authors attributed the leprosy common there to the fact that the diet consisted of little but dried fish in winter and fresh fish in summer. Other diseases they mentioned were consumption and scurvy (ibid:107), which are caused by poor living conditions and malnutrition.

The eighteenth century was a time of catastrophe for Iceland as a whole. In 1707 about 18,000 people (one third of the population) died from smallpox. The eruptions of the "Oræfajökull volcano in 1727-8, Katla in 1755 and Laki in 1783 devastated the surrounding areas and affected the whole country. The Laki eruption poisoned the soil everywhere and it has been estimated that 53% of the nation's sheep died as a result. Some 9,000 people died of starvation (Magnússon, op.cit.: 116-7).

The Icelanders also suffered from the effects of the trading monopoly. Their goods were bought at low prices or for spirits. Very inferior products were imported to

the country; when the people were dying of starvation the merchants brought putrid flour. From 1749 Skúli Magnússon, the first Icelander to be appointed as royal superintendent, did try to improve conditions. The trading monopoly was temporarily broken and he encouraged new industries and better agricultural practice. Freedom to trade with Iceland was granted to all Danes in 1787 but the new industries failed and then the country was devastated by the Laki eruption. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the country's decline reached its nadir with the abolition, by royal order, of the Alþing on 11 July 1800.

There is a tendency to date Iceland's progressive decline from the union with Norway in the thirteenth century, but as demonstrated, significant socio-economic changes were taking place before this. The colonial rule and natural disasters only continued the process whereby the majority of Icelanders became relatively poor farmers, renting small areas of land. The following case study of Fróneyri, the area in which I carried out fieldwork, illustrates the life of the people in the island prior to the nineteenth century industrialisation which was to shape modern Iceland.

## 2.6. Fróneyri in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries

The autobiography written by a man from Fróneyri has been mentioned briefly. From this work some picture of the times can be gained. The man was born on a farm that still has the same name today. His parents had 14 children but only three survived childhood. At 18 months he was sent to a couple on another farm to be fostered. When he was

ten dysentery raged through the district, killing many people including his own father. He nearly drowned three times as a child and when a young man, came close to death in the mountains, trying to reach and feed sheep trapped by snow. He mentioned the Torture Winter (Píningsvetur) of 1601-2 when starvation was only avoided when a whale stranded in the fjord, provided meat for the people of the area. (In Iceland as a whole it is thought some 9,000 starved to death during the terrible winter of 1601-2). He recalled that it was during this year that Danish, rather than Hamburg, merchants first came to the area.

A picture of the poverty of the Icelandic people is given in this autobiography. The conditions in the island began to be of concern to the Danish authorities and various investigations were made to establish just what life was like there. From these records-censuses, land registers and the reports of commissioners, the pattern of land holdings and types of household structure can be discerned.

As part of an investigation of conditions in the country ordered by the Danish Crown, Árni Magnússon and Páll Víðalín organised the first complete census of the population in 1703. Details of each commune were collected by the local civil official hreppstjóri. For Fróneyri the census gives the name of each farm, stating whether it was rented and if so the value of the land leased by each farmer.

The census does not specify land ownership but this was recorded in land registers of 1686 and 1695 which have been analysed by Lárusson (1967). These show that of the

fifteen named farms in the parish then recorded, only five were owned as private property. The Crown had four properties and the Church three. Two farms were respectively part-Crown/part-private property and part-Church/part-private property. One, noted as subject to erosion and of nil taxable value, was charity land.

In the country as a whole Lárusson calculated the following figures for value of land held by the different owners: private property - 52%, ecclesiastical property - 32%, Crown property - 16% (ibid. 60). He also discerned that as regards private property, more than twice as many men owned land as women (818 versus 394), but in terms of average value of land holdings, there was little difference between men and women (ibid:73-74). This indicates that laws giving women inheritance rights were observed but the small number of land owners, just over 1,200 in a population of about 49,000 demonstrates the extent to which the people were tenant farmers not freeholders. It should also be noted that land was very unevenly distributed among owners:

"Briefly, two thirds of the owners controlled less than one fifth of the value of the farms and one third controlled more than four fifths of the value. Many owned only a part of a farm that was often too small to support a family. They therefore either leased out their share to others or rented the shares of the other owners of the farm, thus being able to support a household (6-8 persons). This applied especially to farms situated in districts devoted mainly to cattle raising. In areas where fishing was available, the owner could manage on a farm share of 1-4 hundreds."

(ibid:72)

(Land was assessed in terms of its value rather than area. This was expressed as hundreds, the long hundred of 120. Each hundred was equal to 120 ells of homespun cloth or

one cow of four to eight years which had calved at least twice (ibid:32) ).

In 1703 the total population of the commune of Fróneyri was 257 (139 female, 118 male) and there were 22 farm sites.<sup>10</sup> Ten of these were undivided but the others were subdivided into two or three parcels, giving a total of 40 households. These ranged in size from 16 to 2 persons. The majority, 37, of the heads of household (indicated by their name coming first and the amount of land leased being written against it) were men. The three women who headed households were all widows and two of them had very small farm shares: to the value of two hundreds and three hundreds. The other widow leased one of the largest farmshares, to the value of 12 hundreds. This supported a household of 12 comprising her two teenage sons, a farm manager, five female and three male servants and a man described as of no fixed abode (lausamaður). Of the 37 men who headed households, 30 were married; their wives simply being recorded as hans kona (his wife) in the census. Of the remaining seven men, four were widowers and three unmarried. It is noticeable that these men either employed a housekeeper bústýra (four cases) or it can be inferred that the man's mother or daughter ran the home.

A bare majority of the households had servants vinnuhjú (23 out of 40). The number employed ranged from one to eight but the average per household was just over two. Fifty four people were classified as servants (33 women, 21 men) and their ages were from 15 to 53 years. Only three of these

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10. A full discussion of the process of analysing the census data is given in the next chapter.

people were married, which accords with the observation made by Ólafsson and Pálsson, in the middle of the eighteenth century, that such people rarely married (op.cit.:92). This was because they could not accumulate the property required by law to establish a separate home, to the value of 40 rix dollars. A male servant of the time received three rix dollars in kind and money annually. A woman got about half that. Ólafsson and Pálsson described such people as celibate, but that of course is another matter. All the census can demonstrate is that they were unmarried. The age at which people were categorised as servants appears to have been about 15 years. The four younger people (two boys and a girl of 14 and a boy of 10) who had a job description were classified as ljettapiltur and ljettastúlka (errand boy and errand girl).

Davidoff (1979:84) noted that there was a cyclical pattern in peasant households as regards the employment of servants: before the children were old enough to work and again after they had left home. This census data shows this pattern to some extent. The average age of children in households with servants was 8.8 years but it was 11.7 years in those without servants. Of the 40 households, 25 fully conform to the pattern as they were either ones with young children and servants, grown up children and no servants, or households with no children but servants. Another four households with grown up children had just one servant each. Eleven households did not follow the pattern. Ten of these were families with small children and no servants and the other, the widow's household already mentioned, had eight servants and two sons of 14 and 18. It appears that land is the important factor. The widow

had one of the two most highly valued farms in the commune, while the other families all had low-valued land: none of them more than six hundreds. Indeed, two of these households had land on the charity glebe farm, which in the 1695 land register was noted as subject to erosion and of zero value. I would suggest that it is not just the life cycle stage of the peasant household which determined whether servants were employed but also the differentiation of the peasantry in terms of their landholdings. As regards these eleven households, ten I would suggest, lived on land too poor to warrant the employment of extra-familial labour, while the widow had need for, and land enough to support, a large number of servants.

In the census four men were described as húsmáður, that is, literally, a man of the house but not the householder (Cleasby and Vigfusson, 1957:294 give this usage for Norway).<sup>11</sup> In one case it is probable that this man is a brother of the male householder as their second name is the same and in another he may have been his brother-in-law. Only one has a job description: that of executioner. Otherwise those related to the head of the household were classified by the kin relationship. The majority were daughters and sons but there were also parents, step relatives and adopted children. Only nine households were nuclear families of husband, wife and children. The majority of the households were extended with kin, servants and parish paupers. In the commune there were six female and six male paupers (4.6% of the inhabitants) who were aged from three to 70 years. In the country as a whole, 11% of the population were recorded as paupers at this time (Nordal and Kristinsson, 1975:46).

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11. This term is discussed in the next chapter, section 3.3.1.

## 2.7. The Sexual Division of Labour in the Eighteenth Century

There was a division of labour based upon gender at this time. Women did not only the domestic work in the sense we use it today: the bearing and raising of children, the maintenance of the household through cooking and cleaning, but also took part in the production of subsistence and exchange goods. During the summer months the most important work was harvesting the hay to feed the animals kept over winter. Men usually did the scything while women and children gathered and stacked the hay. In the early summer women and children cleared the fields of debris and spread them with manure and men cut peat. Once the animals were turned out, it was the women's task to milk them and make dairy products. Travelling was easier at this time of the year so the men went to the trading stations to barter and trade. Later in the summer berries and Lichen Islandicus were gathered to make gruel and medicine, the wool collected from the sheep<sup>12</sup>, animals slaughtered and the meat preserved for the winter by drying, smoking and salting. During the winter the women's main task was to clean, card, spin, knit and weave wool, to make clothing for the household and the cloth and knitted goods which were traded. As well as playing their part in the processing of the fish (Troil, . 1780:127-8) the female servants usually had to provide service for the male servants. The women served their food, made their clothing and ensured that they had dry clothes for the next day's fishing.

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12. Sheep were plucked rather than sheared.



The work was organised on a household basis, and carried out by the family members and farm servants. The conditions of service, type of work and remuneration of such workers were set down in law. The Farming Law of 1722 (Búalög Alþingissamþykktin 1722) for instance stated that a woman should, during the summer months, rake the hay cut by two average mower men, between milking times. In the winter she was expected to weave 12 lengths of cloth in six days and could have a light to work by if she wished. This also had to be done between milking times. She was also obliged to provide clean, dry footwear for two working men if this was needed. A catch-all sentence added that throughout the year she should be ready to do all the work, both inside the farm and out, which a reasonable master might require. Her pay was given in kind as lengths of cloth and materials for clothing. If a skilled weaver, she was supposed to receive more pay and the law specifically stated that if she did men's work, such as mowing hay, fishing or peat cutting, she should get the same wages as a man.

The Farming Law recognised that the division of labour was not absolute, but whether women actually received enhanced wages for men's work is not known. There is evidence that women in some parts of the country went fishing in the open rowing boats (Jónsson, 1975:3) but Ólafsson and Pálsson wrote that women in Vestfirðir did not go to sea (op.cit.:107). Although wool work was mainly the occupation of women, references are to be found to men doing tasks such as fulling (Henderson, 1819:282; Troil, op.cit.:113-4) and spinning and knitting (Ólafsson and Pálsson op.cit.:21). Sigurðardóttir (1980:9)

noted that men took up weaving after 1800 with the introduction of the Danish loom, which was easier to operate.<sup>13</sup>

Women's wages, as the farming law stated, were lower than men's. Ólafsson and Pálsson recorded them as being half that of men's (op.cit.:24). A submission in the name of Iceland's poor to the Danish Royal Commission of 1770-1 mentioned the lower pay of women and described them weaving with bloody hands, shivering in the doorway of the house. They took over the men's work when they were away at sea and then returned to their weaving (Íslands fátæklingar, 1948:89). This had not changed by the end of the nineteenth century when as Jónsson recalled, women's wages were half that of men's (1953:67-68).

It is clear that women were fully engaged in the production of goods for consumption and exchange. They also had the major role in the reproduction of the household. Their contribution was undervalued compared to that of men, as the difference in wages paid to women and men servants indicated.

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13. One of the men in Fróneyri, speaking of his natal home in the early years of this century, said it was his father who did the weaving.

CHAPTER THREE - HOUSEHOLD AND OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE  
1820-1978

3.1. Introduction

One of the issues which arose from the feminist critique of the social sciences was the relative neglect of domestic work as a subject of study. In what became known as the domestic labour debate an attempt was made to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of the work done within households, in particular its relationship with the capitalist economy. Questions were addressed such as whether housewives could be categorised as a class, was housework a mode of production and if it was value and/or surplus value producing?<sup>1</sup>. Two later contributions to this area of discussion criticised the debate as a whole for concentrating too narrowly on housework (Molyneux, 1979:21), and for employing a culturally and historically limited concept of domestic work.

"One example of this is that we held our concept 'domestic' to be unproblematic, whereas in fact we were using the word in two analytically distinct senses: domestic work as work done within the home, and domestic work as a particular kind of work, such as child care, cooking and cleaning, servicing the members of a household. In our society, work which is domestic in the first sense is also generally domestic in the second sense, but this fact is specific to our society (that is, not universal) and it requires explanation."

(Mackintosh, 1979:175)

More recently, Harris has written a critique of how the concept of the household has been used. She argued that there is a tendency for the household to be conflated with the family and seen as the 'natural' sphere of women (1981:49-51).

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1. A short summary of the domestic labour debate is given in section 5.1.

In this chapter I intend to take up the issues raised by Mackintosh and Harris and give an analysis of the census data from Fróneyri for the years 1820 to 1978. It was during this period that Iceland made the transition from being a predominately rural to urban society and the basis of the economy changed from peasant agriculture/fishing to industrialised waged labour. An overview of this process is given in the next section.

It is possible to give a fine-grained account of the effects of this economic transition on the structure of households and the work carried out by people who belonged to them, because of the census records. Such data are, however, a particular system of classification, so prior to presenting the analysis the problems of interpreting the censuses are discussed.

### 3.2. Overview of the Economy and population of Iceland and Fróneyri 1820-1978

Table I. The Population of Fróneyri 1820-1978

<u>Date</u>	<u>Pop.</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Pop.</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
1820	234	122	112	1890	383	196	187
1835	237	132	105	1901	550	279	271
1840	273	151	122	1910	616	293	323
1845	257	138	119	1920	536	258	278
1850	261	137	124	1930	457	241	216
1855	300	162	138	1940	350	181	169
1860	326	180	146	1950	316	151	165
1870	378	195	183	1960	274	148	126
1880	381	201	180	1978	219	106	113

n.b. In the years where it is recorded, the figures include those temporarily away from the parish.

Source: Manntal á Íslardi,  
Fieldwork

The economy of Iceland in the early nineteenth century was very much like that of the eighteenth century described in the previous chapter. The disasters and deprivations of that century meant the economy and way of life of the people had hardly changed. Fish and wool, major export commodities, were still produced by the members of the farming/fishing households. However, as the century progressed the economy began to expand, the population increased and, it appears, the life of the people improved. Writing of what she observed during her trips to the country in the 1870s, Oswald stated that she saw none of the beggars nor abject poverty which Hooker had noted in the first years of the century (1882:109, 113).

Agriculture expanded but disasters reminiscent of the previous centuries still took place. In 1800 there were 307,000 sheep, which increased to 516,850 in 1853. An epidemic then killed off some 36% of them. The number of cows stayed constant but horses increased in number and became an important export. Free Trade was finally introduced in 1845 and the level of trade, both importing and exporting, increased dramatically (Gjerset, 1922:363-4).

The following table taken from Gjerset, shows the increase in exports after the introduction of Free Trade. It also demonstrates that the woven and knitted goods produced by women, were important exports, although they became less competitive over time because of the growth of industrial weaving in other countries.

Table 2. Leading Exports from Iceland before and after Free Trade

	<u>1849</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>1872</u>
Salted fish	2,783	tons	4,030
Dried Cod	561	tons	78
Salted Roe	308	barrels	1,558
Salted Salmon	2,640	kilograms	18,480
Train-oil	3,259	barrels	9,493
Salted Meat	1,235	barrels	1,985
Tallow	646,874	pounds	264,204
Wool	1,397,148	pounds	1,295,212
x Knitted Jackets	8,405		118
x Socks	91,145	pairs	54,741
x Seamen's Mittens	78,962	pairs	14,347
x <u>Vaðmál</u>	5,808	ells	759
Sheepskins	9,745		8,382
Lambskins	13,405		25,481
Fox Skins	396		312
Swan Skins	94		40
Swan Feathers	21,875		21,400
Eiderdown	3,991	pounds	7,253
Feathers	19,268	pounds	26,801
x woollen goods			
<u>Vaðmál</u> = homespun			

Source: Gjerset, 1922:414

Iceland was still a rural society. The growth of villages, let alone towns, came in the latter part of the century. In 1786 Reykjavík, the capital and only town, had 302 inhabitants. In 1801 only 0.6% of the population lived in villages of 200 people or more in size. A century later only 21.4% of the people lived in settlements of this size. The total population of the country actually fell during the eighteenth century and stood at 47,240 in 1801. It had doubled by the 1920s and now stands at just under 250,000. Today about half of the people live in and around Reykjavík, and the majority of others in towns and villages. In less than a century Iceland has changed from a predominately rural to urban society.

Until the 1870s deep sea fishing was largely controlled by the French. The Icelanders fished from open rowing boats in the fjords and a few miles off-shore. They were just introducing deck sailing boats and establishing their own herring industry in the 1870s (Oswald, op.cit.:112). New industries came to Fróneyri in the last decades of the century in the form of whaling and herring/salt fish stations. In Iceland as a whole agriculture also expanded at this time (Nordal and Kristinsson, 1975:25-26). Vestfirðir is a marginal farming area compared to other parts of the island and closest to the richest fishing grounds, which explains why the growth of the fishing rather than agricultural sector was of most importance in Fróneyri.

There was a dramatic effect on the population of the parish; it increased in eleven years from 383 to 550 in 1901 and peaked in 1910 at 616, before falling for the rest of the century. After the closure of the whaling stations, the area depended on the salting and drying of white fish. Most of the fish processing took place in the open air: cleaning the fish and laying the fillets out to dry. It was quite common for both men and women to travel for a season to other parts of the country to get work; the men to get berths as fishermen or do labouring on road construction, the women to work at herring stations. Before the second world war most travel was done on foot, by horse or boat. The road from Fróneyri to the next village was not completed until after the war. Commodities such as coal and food and the post were brought in by boat.

The war had a profound economic effect on Iceland. Many thousands of allied soldiers were stationed there and they brought in money and created employment. Women living in

areas where the soldiers were stationed got jobs in the camps doing laundry and other domestic-type work. The demand for food by Britain boosted the fishing industry and meant that capital investment could be made to modernise the industry, particularly by building freezing factories. It was during the 1940s that the first freezing factory opened in Fróneyri. It produced the higher valued frozen, rather than salted or dried, fish.

Vestfirðir as a whole suffered from depopulation from 1940 onwards, losing 17% of its population by 1974 (Jónsson, 1976:14). Some villages in the region did grow in size but the population of Fróneyri continued to fall. In the 1970s a stern trawler was based in the area and this ensured that there were regular supplies of fish for the factory, since the trawler could go out in all but the worst weather. Plentiful work was available but educational, social/recreational opportunities and a greater variety of employment could be found in other parts of the country, chiefly Reykjavík. Young people tended not to settle in Fróneyri and the factory began to hire foreigners.

### 3.3. The Data: Descriptions and Definitions

In Iceland census records, both handwritten originals and printed copies, are kept in the National Manuscript Museum in Reykjavík. The records are open to everyone and there is no bar on examining even the most recent material. For the years 1940, 1950 and 1960 I was able, indeed had to use (because there were no printed copies available) the census forms filled in by the people of



Fróneyri. Unfortunately the books could not be removed from the library and there were no photocopying facilities available. The Icelandic Statistical Bureau issues reports based on the census material, but they are statistical compilations and I wanted the detailed information. Quite simply I had to copy the records by hand, which took about two months. I obtained 18 sets of records: 1703, 1820, 1835 then every five years until 1860 followed by every decade until 1960. No census was taken after that date because a system of constantly up-dating the records of people's domicile was introduced and from this an annual report is abstracted in December.<sup>2</sup> I took a copy of the list of residents in Fróneyri on 1st December 1977 and amended it based upon my knowledge of the village in 1978.

Except for 1820 (when the exact date is not specified), it is known that all the censuses were taken during the winter months. The person responsible for them in the nineteenth century was the hreppstjóri a local civil official. He was identified by name from 1850 to 1890. In the years 1820 to 1920 the area designated was the parish (sókn). In 1703 it was the commune (hreppur) while in 1950 the name of the village was given, although the census extended to farms not in the village. The names of the farmsites have not altered from 1703 until the present day, except where new ones have been added. In this century many of the farms have been abandoned. Both my knowledge of the area and the persistence of place names in the records show that whatever the area designated by name, it was in fact the same geographical area. This is confirmed by the designation in 1930, 1940 and 1960 when it was 'Fróneyrarsókn/Fróneyrarhreppur' combined.

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2. Anyone who moves in the country is supposed to register with the local district authorities.

The information each census provided did vary. The 1703 one, already referred to, gave farm, the value of land leased if it was divided, the names of the household members, their ages, kin relationships if any, and occupations. Later censuses followed this pattern except that property ownership was only given in 1901 and 1940 to 1960. From 1845 to 1960 with the exception of 1901, 1920 and 1930 the censuses recorded those born in the parish. In 1901, 1910 and 1930 the number of their children (whether living or dead) was put against adults' names. Danish was used to describe occupations in 1835. For the years 1940 onwards the census forms provided a wealth of information: housing tenure, building materials, facilities such as the provision of electricity, piped water and sewerage. More occupational details were given as people were asked to note winter and summer jobs in 1940 and 1960 and primary and secondary occupations in 1950.

### 3.3.1. Households

The most complicated problem in analysing the data was trying to identify households. Using census data is to approach a society through a particular system of classification. This system has itself to be examined in order to read through the data to gain a picture of the society. In this case, because a diachronic analysis was the aim, it also meant recognising that the classification system was likely to change over 150 years. This was indeed the case. The problem can be illustrated by examining two issues which relate to the identification of households: the way in which censuses were set out, and the position of those people who were classified, in English terms, as lodgers and tenants.

a) Homes and Households

Until 1840 the name of the farmsites were given and the separate abodes indicated by the word býli. From 1845 to 1880 the separate premises were given roman or arabic numerals or named. For instance, the farmsite and main farmhouse might be called Eyri and another abode called Eyrakot (kot means cottage). In addition it was during this period that some houses were described as purrabúð or tómthús, literally a dry cottage and empty house, indicating that they had no land attached and the household was primarily dependent on fishing to make a livelihood.

At the turn of the century the economy of the area diversified and expanded with the introduction of whaling stations and fish-factories. The village of Fróneyri began to grow up. This was reflected in the growth in the number of houses which were called purrabúð and which were in multiple occupation, housing a number of families. This social and economic change was reflected in the variety of ways the census enumerators adopted to order the censuses.

A total of 60 'units' were recorded for 1890. They seem to have been the enumerator's understanding of households, taking into account the multiple occupancy of houses. In 1901 the word býli was used again and it indicated the separate abodes on the farmsites and the divided accommodation in the íbúðarhús (dwelling-houses) which had been built in the village. In 1910 the census was organised in terms of buildings and their occupants, giving no clear indication of the division of accommodation or households. Arabic numerals were used to indicate households in 1920 but buildings were not specified in all cases. Thus under the heading Frón (once a farmsite now the site of the village),

17 households but no houses were listed. Both buildings and households were given in 1930. From 1940 onwards, because I used the census forms, it was relatively easy to discern the houses, how they were divided and the households occupying them.

b) Household Composition

The second complication was that a number of people in the censuses were designated as i) húskona/maður, ii) lausakona/maður and iii) leigjandi. Dictionaries translate these terms as respectively i) a woman or man "of the house" or a lodger or a beggar, ii) a free worker not tied to their workplace, iii) a lodger. The question was to examine how these terms were used in the census and what might be the position of such people in the household.

As mentioned, there is a tendency to assume that family and household are one and the same thing. To do so is to make an ethnocentric judgement because historically and cross-culturally the meaning of these terms has varied. For instance, Flandrin showed that for eighteenth century France 'family' incorporated ideas of kinship and co-residence. The term was used when referring to kin, not necessarily living together and those living under one roof who may not have been linked by consanguineal or affinal ties (1976:4-5). Harris' view was that in English the term household means:

"... an institution whose primary feature is co-residence: it is overwhelmingly assumed that people who live within a single space, however that is socially defined, share in the tasks of day-to-day servicing of human beings, including consumption, and organise the reproduction of the next generation."

(op.cit.:52)

Laslett, in his attempt to develop a means of identifying and classifying co-resident domestic groups, which would be of use in making historical and cross-cultural comparisons, implicitly agreed with this characterisation, because he assumed locational and functional, but not kinship criteria, to be universal. This allowed for the inclusion of those:

"... known to have shared in the activities of the domestic group in which they lived though not related by marriage or blood to any other member. These were the servants, the visitors, boarders and lodgers, who appear along with other members of the family or household within the blocks of names which we are discussing."

(1972:25)

When identifying households Laslett included servants but not lodgers, boarders etc.

"We have tried to accommodate individuals in this uncertain familial position by counting them as part of the domestic group when it is looked upon from certain viewpoints, but not when the family itself, or even the household, is in question."

(ibid: 26-27)

Kinship slips in to explain why such people are not counted as a part of the household. The pictorial representation of households developed by Laslett, leaves such people in a space, part of the (to use his term) houseful, but not the household (ibid:42). It is recognised that such a solution is not entirely satisfactory, particularly as people so designated may have been related to members of the household (ibid:35).

In her analysis of lodging in England, Davidoff noted that both census administrators and historians have

encountered difficulty in 'coping with' boarders and lodgers (1979:76-78). Very often they are counted separately, classed with others such as visitors, as residuals or inmates. This reinforces the family ideal of the household, disguises the social significance of lodging during particular eras and leads to women's work as landladies being ignored.

When analysing the Icelandic census material I have not necessarily excluded those designated as húskona/maður, leigjandi or lausakona/maður from households. To do so because of definitional fiat, is shown to be unwarranted when a close examination is made of the data. Until 1880 only the terms húskona/maður were in use, except for one instance of lausamaður being mentioned in 1703. Frequently these people were recorded as being relatives of the householders, most often parents or siblings. Even when a kinship connection was not stated, I was able to establish one in some cases, by working back and forth between decades checking names and ages. In other instances I suspected a kinship link but this could not be substantiated. The Icelandic naming system and reoccurrence of common names meant that I could not assume, for instance, that Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Jónas Jónsson were siblings.

In general I did find that the words húskona/maður were used to describe people related to the householders, frequently single or widowed and often elderly. Occasionally when the words were used of a younger person, they were also designated as a farmworker. The inference is very strongly supported that such people were, as the words imply "of the house" and should be considered as part of the household.



Lausakona/maður was used again in the Fróneyri census of 1880. The term itself refers to a person's occupational status and was used 26 times until 1930. It was most frequently single men (17) who had this description; only five single women, two widowers and two married men were so designated. Usually they shared accommodation, but sometimes they had a separate home. This was also true of those called leigjandi, a word first used in the 1901 census. It would therefore appear that leigjandi means, in English terms, both lodger and tenant. Húskona/maður continued in use after 1880 but it was now more frequently used to describe young and married people, some in their own accommodation. The words were sometimes found in combination as in "húskona,leigjandi". From 1940 onwards only leigjandi was in use.

If an analysis of census data is to be expressed purely in statistical terms, the issues discussed above might be viewed as critical problems because in some periods the identification of households is made difficult to the point of impossibility. However, if the aim is, in this case, to identify historical trends, these very issues may provide insight. The variety of systems the enumerators used to order the censuses, and the increase in the number and type of people who were lodgers or tenants are indicative of the changes taking place in Fróneyri in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

At this time the economy expanded, population increased and village became established. There was a new class of free workers and an increase in the types of employment available for men. A new type of accommodation was built - houses rather than farmhouses or cottages, and the variety

of living arrangements increased. There were still households made up of a family, other kin, servants, paupers etc., but also other types, such as more than one family sharing a cottage and larger houses divided and in multiple occupation. As an example those living in one house in 1910, are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Occupants of a House 1910

Svein Jensson	b. 1862	m. 1903	
Jóna Tómasdóttir	b. 1875	m. 1903	
Guðrún Sveinsdóttir	b. 1907		
Helgi Jónsson	b. 1880	m. 1908	<u>húsmáður</u>
Stúlka <sup>3</sup> Sveinsdóttir	b. 1910		their daughter
Palína Sigurðardóttir	b. 1889	m. 1908	housewife
Anna Jónsdóttir	b. 1874	s.	worker
Tómas Tómasson	b. 1844	m. 1899	<u>húsmáður</u>
Jóhanna Þorlaksdóttir	b. 1865	m. 1899	his wife
Friðgerður Sigurðardóttir	b. 1890		fosterchild
Jón Petursson	b. 1874	m. 1906	<u>húsmáður</u>
Guðbjörg Magnúsdóttir	b. 1884	m. 1906	his wife
Sigríður Jónsdóttir	b. 1907		
Ásta Jónsdóttir	b. 1909		
Simon Helgason	b. 1909		
Stúlka <sup>3</sup> Helgadóttir	b. 1910		

Source: Manntal á Íslandi

There were clearly four families in the house but to assume that these were four households is to beg the question. Even if the divisions in terms of the space within the house were to be given, it could not be assumed that, in any meaningful sense, these were separate households. The census cannot give this information, but the possibility that people living in such close proximity co-operated in economic and other ways must be allowed. It is very likely

3. stúlka means girl. Children in Iceland are usually named some time after their birth. In the meantime they are known by a pet name.



that the work of getting food, fuel, and water, cooking, manufacture of clothing and care of children was shared.

It was also during this period of transition in the economy that the verbúð, lodging-houses provided by the fishing boat owners for the fishermen, were first mentioned. This is the significance of the censuses being taken during the winter, the most important fishing season.

It was not until the 1930s, after the population had begun to fall, that sharing of accommodation decreased. The number of lodgers fell markedly and once again they were mainly single people, fishermen staying with a family. This trend continued in subsequent years and the predominant contemporary form of the household is a single family occupying a house.

### 3.3.2. Occupation and Status

Various status and occupational terms were used in the censuses. In some years a male householder was designated only as húsbóndi, a cognate of the English husband, which in Icelandic means the master of the house - a status rather than occupational term. In the first few decades of the last century men were usually described as a bóndi. This means a farmer, but cannot be taken to mean that his, or the household's, economic activities were exclusively agricultural. They would also have fished and processed wool for their own consumption and for exchange. In later years more details of the various, and multiple, male occupations were given.

In most years a man's wife was called just that, hans kona, or housewife (húsmóðir). Widowed women who headed households were described as ekkja (widow), housewife, or

occasionally as farmer. This tendency to classify women by their marital status rather than giving details of occupation, may have resulted in women's waged work being under-reported in this century. Prior to the introduction of fish-factories there is no doubt that the women were fully involved in the productive and reproductive activities on the farms. But as commercial fishing developed their work as processors may have been disguised because the censuses continued to classify them as housewives, until more recent decades.

Children were usually classified by their kinship status specifying whether they were children of the husband, the wife or were children they had in common. Adopted, fostered and pauper children were specified. Occasionally, the householders' children were additionally described as vinnukona/maður (farmworkers) in the nineteenth century; or I was able to establish that people called workers were their children. Some children as young as ten years were described as errand girl or boy or shepherd girl or boy. Whether specified as such or not, children would have been contributing to the work of the farms from an early age (Grímsson and Broddason, 1977:76).

In 1703 farm servants were called vinnuhjú but simply hjú in 1820. In later decades they were called vinnukona (working woman) or vinnumaður (working man). Until 1863 such people were tied to the farm where they took work, for a year. After that date a licence could be bought enabling them to negotiate their terms of employment. Initially such a lausamenskubréf cost eitt hundrad for a man and 1/2 hundrad for a woman (i.e. the cost of one cow and half a cow). This was much more than a year's wages. In 1894 the cost was

reduced to 15 krónur for a man and five for a woman, aged over 22 years. It was free for people of 30 years. The age was reduced to 20 in 1907 and the system abolished in 1928, by which time it had fallen into disuse. (Sigurðardóttir, 1975). Whether this regulation and others concerning the employment of servants was applied to the householders' children, cannot be judged from the census.

In later decades the terms vinnukona/maður came to be applied to all workers, not only those in the farming households. Unless there is further elaboration it is not possible to distinguish farm servants, domestic servants and those engaged in other occupations, such as working in the fish-factories.

The final category which needs consideration is that of women called bústýra or ráðskona. Oswald wrote

"There is sometimes in a good family a working housekeeper, often a relation, who lives with the family as an equal; and young girls frequently make a stay at friends' houses to be trained in housewifely duties."

(op.cit.:114-5)

The data from Fróneyri shows that such women were usually found in a household where the male householder was widowed or single. In a very few instances, where the housewife was reported as being sick, there was a housekeeper. Widows who headed their households usually seem to have managed without a substitute for their husbands, because ráðsmaður (farm manager) appeared only a few times in the data. Often the housekeeper was a relative of the man - his daughter, sister or mother. In other cases, as the presence of children showed, the húsbóndi and ráðskona were cohabitees.

A relaxed attitude towards pre- and extra-marital sexual relations is emphasised by writings on Icelandic

history; and from the earliest periods the society's attitude does seem to have been pragmatic, with laws being made for the maintenance and inheritance of illegitimate children. However, there was a dual standard as regards women and men. Women's adultery was punished and until the middle of the nineteenth century women were whipped for repeatedly having illegitimate children (Valdimarsdóttir, 1929:3-4). The statistics show that in the nineteenth century the percentage of such births never fell below 13.8% and reached over 20% in the 1880s (Tomasson, 1976:253). Tomasson, like Björnsson (1976:13) cited in explanation the persistence of the attitude that the civil rite of betrothal, rather than the religious rite of marriage, sanctioned sexual relationships. He also suggested that Icelandic women enjoyed relatively high status and economic freedom in Iceland's early centuries (op.cit.: 256-8). In writing of the liberty of women during the Settlement and Commonwealth periods, commentators are presumably referring to the aristocratic, rather than slave or servant woman.

Consideration of the position of women in the nineteenth century, when work as a servant or housekeeper was the only employment available, raises the question of whether sexual relationships between master and servant were entirely freely entered into, in every instance. Census data says nothing about the conduct of relationships between members of a household and there is little other information on this subject. The documented cases of Katrína Tómasdóttir in 1840 and Guðrún Þorleifsdóttir in 1916/17 (Sigurðardóttir, 1975), who were turned out of their places of employment for refusing the sexual advances of their employers, are evidence that this sort of exploitation was attempted. How many women

may have acquiesced in order to retain their jobs and a roof over their heads, cannot be assessed.

What the census does suggest is that sometimes a house-keeper was employed and paid wages for her work, but the position was also filled by relatives and cohabittees who probably received no direct remuneration for their work. In the early decades of this century it appears that 'house-keeper' was often used in the census as a 'polite fiction' to describe women who were wives in all ways except the eyes of the law.

Table 4. Summary of Status and Occupational Terms Discussed in the Text

<u>Term</u>		<u>Remarks</u>
Húskona/maður	Woman or man of the house, lodger, beggar	Initially applied mainly to single, elderly relatives; later to married lodgers and tenants
Lausakona/maður	Free worker	Most frequently single men
Leigjandi	Lodger or tenant	
Húsbóndi	Male head of household	
Bóndi	Farmer	Household usually combined agriculture and fishing
Húsmóðir	Housewife	) Use of these terms ) may have disguised ) some of women's ) waged labour
(Hans) kona	Wife of a man already mentioned	
Ekkja	Widow	
Hjú/vinnuhjú	Servant/farm servant	Tied to their workplace until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Sometimes used of kin
Vinnukona/maður	Servant/farm servant/worker	Came to be used of a variety of waged workers
Ráðskona/bústýra	Housekeeper	Applied to servants, relatives and cohabittees
Ráðsmaður	Farm manager	Infrequently used

This discussion of some of the problems encountered when analysing census data underlines the complexity of identifying households, the status of individuals and the relationships between people who live together. The inadequacy of assuming that family and household are one and the same, to which Harris drew attention, is revealed.

#### 3.4. Household Structures and Employment Patterns 1820-1960

Harris suggested that there has been a tendency to treat households as a natural unit, implicitly or explicitly coterminous with the family. Work done there is seen, by default, as exclusively childraising and housework which reproduces the household. Such households are viewed as isolated from wider social and economic structures (Harris, op.cit.:53).

This view cannot be sustained as regards Icelandic households. For most of the island's history the household was the locus of virtually all economic and social activities. The Icelanders always engaged in trade and international changes in the importance of commodities could directly affect households. A clear instance occurred in the fourteenth century. Fish became economically more important than wool. This caused a demographic change, a shift of population to the coast, and increased the dependence on fishing, to the detriment of agriculture. This contributed to the poverty of the nation in later centuries.

The relationship between household members had been subject to regulation from Iceland's earliest history. There were laws governing marriage, inheritance, the treatment

of slaves, terms of employment of servants and the maintenance of paupers and indigent relatives. A law of the Commonwealth Period, for instance, stated:

"A man must first maintain his mother, if he can manage more, then he must also maintain his father. If he can do better still, then he must maintain his children. If still better, then he must maintain his brothers and sisters. If better again, then he must maintain those people whose heir he is and those he has taken in against promise of inheritance. If yet better, he must maintain the freed man to whom he gave liberty".

(quoted in Foote and Wilson,  
1970:120)

Although what happened in practice is unlikely to have followed the laws absolutely, it is certainly not possible to maintain the fiction that households were isolated from political, social, economic and legal structures. In what follows it is shown that not only has the form of the household changed over time, but that its functions and the work carried out by its members have altered significantly.

#### 3.4.1. 1820

In 1820 the structure of households in Fróneyri was similar to that of 1703 described in the previous chapter. Only five consisted of nuclear families of man, woman and children with no servants, other kin, parish paupers or 'lodgers'. Twenty one (55%) of the households had farm servants and women servants were almost double the number of men (28:16). Just one of the servants, a woman was married, while another unmarried woman servant had children. No occupation apart from servant was given for women. Apart from the designation húsbóndi, three men were described as

Table 5. Households in Fróneyri 1820<sup>4</sup>

		No.	%	No. with Servants
1. Solitaries		-	-	-
2. No family		-	-	-
3. Simple family households	a) married couples alone	2	5.3	2
	b) married couple with children	19	50.0	12
	c) widowers with children	2	5.3	2
	d) widows with children	5	13.2	-
4. Extended family households	a) extended upwards	3	7.9	1
	b) extended downwards	2	5.3	1
	c) units all on one level	-	-	-
	d) combinations of 4a-c	3	7.9	2
5. Frérèches <sup>5</sup>		2	5.3	1
		<u>38</u>	<u>100.2</u>	<u>21</u>

priest, parish official and former sheriff. Households in the early nineteenth century therefore typically consisted of a core family, other kin, servants, fostered and adopted children, parish paupers and lodgers.

### 3.4.2. 1840

This situation was largely unaltered in 1840. The number of servants (72) had increased, as had the percentage of households with them (76%)<sup>6</sup>. Marriage was not so exclusively the preserve of householders as 14 servants were married. Just three people were recorded as paupers

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4. This system of classifying households is taken from Laslett, 1972:31. Because of the Icelandic family system where cohabitation is quite usual before a legal marriage is entered into, I have counted cohabitees as married.

5. In this table and subsequent ones, the number of frérèche, households extended laterally being composed of siblings and their families, is probably slightly undercounted because there were households containing people who are probably siblings, but could not be definitely identified as such.



but there were a large number of adopted (28) and orphaned (7) children. Fostering of children was a common practice in Iceland from the earliest periods and adoption/fostering was necessary in a society with a low life expectancy (38 years for women, 32 years for men in 1850-60) and no institutional provisions. There were no workhouses or orphanages in Iceland and medical services were only developed later in the century. Education and care of the sick, elderly, orphaned and poor took place within the households.

These certainly were not, however, the stem families characterised by Le Play. He characterised such peasant households as very large, owning the property they lived on and in and settled from generation to generation (Laslett, *op.cit.*:16-21). An analysis of the census data for Fróneyri for the 20 years 1835 to 1855 when five censuses were taken, shows this clearly. By charting the households living on different farms and parts of farms I was able to trace how the farms were divided and consolidated over time, and the movement of households. At the end of the twenty years just 10 families were occupying the same farms as they had in 1835. During the intervening years some households disappeared, new ones were set up and other families made internal moves within the parish, going from one farm to another.

There are a number of factors which contributed to this degree of mobility and lack of continuity in the occupation of the farms. These censuses did not specify

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6. Seven of the servants were relatives of the householders: five children, a brother and a sister.

Table 6. Farms and Farmshares: Families Occupying Them  
1835-1855

	<u>1835</u>	<u>1840</u>	<u>1845</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1855</u>
Number of farms/farmshares	31	33	30	30	33
Families living on )same		18 <sup>a</sup>	21 <sup>b</sup>	20 <sup>c</sup>	23 <sup>d</sup>
them compared to five)changed		6	3	2	1
years previously )new		9	6	8	9
Same family as 1835		18	16	15	10

Taken over by the next generation a) 1 son b) 3 sons  
c) 2 sons, 1 daughter d) 2 sons, 1 daughter

Source: Manntal á Íslandi

land ownership but the likelihood is that many of the people rented their farms from the Church, Crown or absentee landowners (see section 2.6.) Some rented just part of a farm. Many people were not in a position to inherit a farm because their parents did not own it. The percentages of those living in the parish, who were born there, also indicates a high degree of population mobility. In 1845 it was 47.7%, 1850—50.5% and 1855—46.7%. It might be argued that this could be accounted for by a large number of farm servants travelling the country looking for work. Householders and their families might have been more settled. But in fact the figures show that in these years, in only 50% of cases were the householders (husband, wife or both) born in the parish. The low life-expectancy has already been mentioned. Disease, accidents or a particularly bad winter could impoverish or result in the death of people. The harsh conditions in Iceland during this era also explain why generation after generation did not necessarily farm the same land.

3.4.3. 1860

Three of the houses in 1860 were specified as being purraþúð, the home of a household dependent on fishing. Writing of what he saw in Reykjavík in the 1860s, Browne described the fisherfolk's cottages, where the people lived like "rabbits in a burrow" (1867:433).<sup>7</sup>

"The oozy slime of fish and smoke mingle with the green mould of the rocks; barnacles cover the walls, and puddles make a soft carpeting for the floors. The earth is overhead, and their heads are under the earth, and the light of day has no light job of it to get in edgewise through the windows."

(ibid. 456)

Writing of her journey in 1878, Oswald stated that she stayed at one farm which was squalid and verminous, mentioning it especially because this was unusual in her experience, unlike that of other travellers (op.cit.:204). Oswald stayed in houses in Reykjavík, churches or farms in the country, rather than fishing cottages. The likelihood is that purraþúð were much more insalubrious than the farmhouses.

In Fróneyri details of the heads of households' occupations were given in 1860 and it is revealed that just nine made their living primarily from the land (8 men and 1 woman). One of these men was also a shipwright. Thirty one others were recorded as making their livelihood

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7. This and subsequent quotations from Browne need to be read as the account of a traveller who focussed on aspects of Icelandic life which contrasted in the extreme with his experience as a wealthy Victorian and who used a rather florid literary style. What he observed is however consistent with the picture presented by others, such as Burton and Oswald who expressed themselves more temperately.

from the sea. Usually this would have been combined with some animal husbandry. One man was a smith and another lived on others' charity. There was little job differentiation for the non-heads of households: the majority were servants (46 women, 29 men), two women were housekeepers, one man a smith and another a priest.

Recalling his experience as a worker at the end of the nineteenth century, Jónsson described the work of the servant women. They got up very early to get coffee ready for the men rowing out to sea. After this the women who did the cooking started making bread and cooked the porridge or fish for breakfast. Often the same woman fed the cow or cows, helped sometimes by an old man or woman who fetched water and ground corn and so on. The other women did wool work in the mornings, weaving, spinning and a lot of knitting - socks, underwear and fishermen's jumpers. The gloves used by the men when rowing were handmade and a lot were needed. The women never had idle hands because as well as the daily work they provided all the domestic service and often needed to wash and dry the men's clothing when they came in soaking from the sea (1953:77-78).

In Iceland it was a custom for women to help men undress at the end of the day. Writing of the early part of the nineteenth century Henderson described what he called this ceremony

"... which exhibits, in the strongest light, the hospitality and innocent simplicity of the Icelandic character".

(1819:113)

In the 1860s Browne had a similar experience and like Henderson found the whole thing rather embarrassing (op.cit.: 537-41). In both these cases it was the daughter of the

house who helped the male guests.

Oswald wrote that it was the practice outside Reykjavík for the women to serve the men's meals. She added:

"But I am bound to say the ladies do not wait respectfully - they join in the conversation, and give their orders, and are considered the givers of the feast".

(op.cit.:115)

One middle-aged woman told me that this was still the custom when she was a child in the 1930s. The other practice Oswald mentioned, that of thanking the woman for the meal, is still the everyday practice after meals today.

#### 3.4.4. The Turn of the Century

When new industries came to the parish at the end of the nineteenth century this directly affected the variety of occupations available for men. In 1901 there were boat owners and outfitters, shipwrights, deckhands, helmsmen, whaleboat captains and engineers, whale station managers and workers: a total of 61 men in all. Eighteen men were farmers but four of these were recorded as combining this with fishing and one was also a merchant. Servants/workmen numbered 30 and six of these were specified as fishermen. More specialised occupations on land were mentioned: carpenter, housebuilders, iron and tin smiths, cobblers, carrier, teacher, haymower and shepherd. It cannot be assumed that the men were able to earn their living exclusively from these occupations the year round, as some were clearly seasonal. The man who was recorded as being a haymower, deckhand and carpenter is an example of someone engaged in multiple occupations. This in all

likelihood happened more than the census reveals. The trend is clear: men were tending to specialise as free workers in one trade which would have been part of their work as a tied worker in the previous century, and moving into the new jobs created in the expanding and technically advancing fishing industry.

There is no evidence of a similar diversification as regards women's employment. In 1880 the only work (apart from wife and servant) mentioned is housekeeper (3) handwork (3) and errand girl (1). Besides "wife", the largest number of women were recorded in 1901 as servant/worker (52). Three of these were detailed as being a cook, a children's nurse and a "winter girl". These were women hired to provide maid service to fishermen during the fishing season.

There were two midwives in the parish, a seamstress and a fishworker. Five women were housekeepers, two at least were cohabitees as indicated by the couples' children. Of the 58 women designated as wife, one worked as a housekeeper for her son, one was a weaver and one a seamstress. This census data does not reveal whether many of the women called wife or worker (vinnukona) were in fact doing waged work in the fishing industry. The likelihood is that many of them were, since processing fish, gutting, drying, salting was very much women's work in the fishing industry as Oswald (op.cit.:14) and Browne (op.cit.:433) observed.

This is one woman's description of the work

"And this is how we had to process the fish: wash the outside under each fin, and the inside without tearing the flesh, take the membrane from the flaps<sup>8</sup>, cut out the bones, remove the blood from the throat and spinal area, and if it was not well done we got the fish back after inspection".

(Hreiðarsdóttir, 1964:17)

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8. The flap or lug is the gill area of a fish.

She mentioned that in 1915 they worked in 15 degrees of frost, when the ice was over a centimetre thick.<sup>9</sup> The amount of labour done by Reykjavík women had impressed Browne:

"The women are really the only class of inhabitants, except the fleas who possess any vitality. Rude, slatternly, and ignorant as they are, they still evince some sign of life and energy compared with the men. Overtaxed by domestic cares, they go down upon the wharves when a vessel comes in, and by hard labour earn enough to purchase a few rags of clothing for their children".

(op.cit.:437)

Burton also commented on the women he saw in Reykjavík working as dockers (1875, vol. 2:44). Of women on the farms, Browne wrote:

"Like all the Icelandic women I had seen, they do all the work of the establishment, attend to the cows, make the cheese, cut the hay, carry the heavy burdens, and perform the manual labour generally. This I found to be the case in all the farm-houses. Sometimes the men assist, but they prefer riding about the country or lying idle about the doors of their cabins".

(op.cit.:486-7)

In Fróneyri at this time a few women were specialising in work which would have been a normal part of their jobs or life in earlier times, midwifery, sewing, childraising. However, there was less diversification than in male occupations.

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9. On a few occasions in the fish-factory in which I worked we had to clean flat fish which was to be frozen whole. This meant washing the fish in water and using a teaspoon to get the muck out of the gut. In less than ten minutes my hands would get so cold it brought tears to my eyes. This was inside a heated building for a few hours at a time; those women did the work outside, day after day.

At this time 50% of the population of Iceland still lived in torfbær, the houses made from turf. This building material was still being used well into this century but the country was able to import wood in increasing quantities as the economy improved. In 1901 about 14 houses in Fróneyri were built from wood. (The 1940 census recorded the building material and age of the houses). Properties in the parish were farms, fish and whale factories and houses in the village. Institutions owned some property: the Church two farms, the State two farms and the commune one building in the village. Twenty properties were wholly-owned and three partly-owned by non-owner-occupiers. All these thirteen landlords were men and some owned a considerable amount of land. One man had four farms and two houses. Two of the whaling stations were foreign owned. Of the 26 owner-occupied properties only two, a house and part of a farm, were owned by women. Equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons had been introduced in 1850 but this does not appear to have affected property ownership in Fróneyri.

Life was still very hard in Iceland at this time. Some 20% of children died before the age of 15 in the period 1901-10. Tuberculosis was a major killer as were the infectious diseases. Measles caused an excess of deaths over births in 1882-3. The last major epidemic which effected the population was the influenza of 1918 (Nordal and Kristinsson, op.cit.:30). I talked to older people who had lost three to four siblings in childhood. A statistically very crude indication of the mortality rates is afforded by the data in the censuses on living and dead children.



Table 7. Children Born to People in Fróneyri

<u>Date</u>	<u>All Births</u>	<u>Living</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Dead</u>	<u>%</u>
1901	549	359	65.4	190	34.6
1910	548	338	61.7	210	38.3
1930	303	209	69.0	94	31.0

Source: Manntal á Íslandi

3.4.5. 1920-1960

By 1920 the whaling stations had closed but there was still a salt/dried fish factory. The population had fallen to 536 (258 female, 278 male). Electricity reached the village in the late 1920s, supplied at first, as villagers recalled, by a rather unreliable generator for a couple of hours a day, twice a week. By 1940, 29 of the 60 homes had electric light, 34 had piped water but the other families still had to fetch water from the streams or river. Nine houses had an inside toilet but only three the luxury of a bath. This was before the age of central heating so warmth was provided, if at all, by fires and stoves fuelled by peat taken from the hillsides or coal brought in by boat. There were 71 households in the parish at this time, nearly all occupying a single house.

Of these households, 29 were nuclear families of a couple and their children, so this was the most numerous type of household. There were still households which were extended by the presence of non-kin such as lodgers, resident workers and those living on parish charity. Most of these 21 households had only one person who was 'extra' to the family.

Table 8. Households in Fróneyri 1940

			<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
1. Solitaries	a) widowed		1	1.4
	b) single of unknown marital status		3	4.2
2. No family	a) co-resident siblings		2	2.8
	b) co-resident relatives of other kinds		2	2.8
	c) persons not evidently related		4	5.6
3. Simple family households	a) married couples		10	14.1
	b) married couples with child(ren)		32	45.0
	c) widowers with child(ren)		1	1.4
	d) widows with child(ren)		3	4.2
4. Extended family households	a) extended upwards		10	14.1
	b) extended downwards		-	-
	c) extended laterally		-	-
	d) combination of 4a-c		3	4.2
			<u>71</u>	<u>99.8</u>

Source: Manntal á Íslandi

As regards occupations this census is particularly informative since it lists both winter and summer occupations. Fifty four men got their living primarily from the sea as deckhands, boatowners, helmsmen, fishworkers and by making nets and sails. Twelve of these are also recorded as being a farmer or keeping sheep. Conversely five of the 23 farmers had some connection with the sea. In addition, one farmer was also a carpenter, another a carrier and a third was recorded as a daily wage worker. Of the 11 workers one was also a smith and one did fishwork. Of the three schoolteachers, one did haymaking and another road construction during the summer. Other occupations held by men were shopkeeper, shepherd, artisan, daily wage worker and fox hunter.

The majority (56) of adult women were classified as wife but the additional information in the census shows that two did fishwork, one was a housekeeper, one knitted and two

did farmwork. Ten women were called workers and 11 housekeepers, while another ten were recorded as working inside the home or doing "various farm work". Four of these also did fishwork, one knitted and one worked in a shop. There were also two kitchen girls, two fishworkers, two woolworkers and one children's nurse. Just one new job is recorded for a woman, that of postmistress. As one of the older women said, speaking of this period, there was very little work for a woman apart from fishwork or domestic service. This was true even if they left the village, since of the eight women who were recorded in the census as working elsewhere in the country, six were domestic servants, one a worker and one worked in an office.

Although some houses had the amenities of electricity and running water, housework still involved a great deal of physical hard work. All clothes were washed by hand and fuel for cooking had to be carried in from outside. Many households kept a few sheep which meant haymaking during the summer, smoking and salting the meat after the autumn slaughter and feeding the animals which were housed during the winter months. Chickens were raised, rhubarb, potatoes and other vegetables were grown. Most clothing, including shoes made from sheep or cat fish skin in the poorer families, was homemade. This food and clothing, produced within the home, was for consumption by household members, to make a saving in the family budget, rather than being commodities for exchange which made a major contribution to the household economy.

By 1960 most of the households occupied a single building: there were only six houses in multiple occupation.

Most of the households were made up of kin. The category of pauper/dependent on charity had disappeared altogether, only four households had resident farm or domestic servants and five had lodgers. The number of people living alone had risen to 13 which made it the second largest group after nuclear families.

#### 3.4.6. A Working Life

I talked to many people about life in the village during this century but got to know in most detail about my landlady's life history. Her working history was typical of the way in which women in Fróneyri moved between paid and unpaid domestic work and fish processing.

Guðrún was born in the 1920s in Fróneyri. Her father owned a small fishing boat and kept a few sheep. Her mother, who had come from another part of Iceland to be a servant on a farm, worked in the salt-fish-factory and kept house. Guðrún finished school when she was confirmed at 14 years of age and worked for two years as a kaupakona<sup>10</sup> on a farm. There was little other work available for girls but the boys could get jobs baiting fishing lines. Work done in the home included weaving and sewing, preserving food in salt and lactic acid, cutting peat for fuel. Water was fetched daily from the stream, or river in the winter when the stream froze over. Washing had to be done in the river by those in homes without a washhouse.

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10. A kaupakona who did farm work such as haymaking and milking was distinguished from a ráðskona who worked only inside the home, according to villagers in 1978.

For a couple of summers before the outbreak of the war Guðrún went with some other young women from the village to a herring station on the north coast. Here she packed fish in salt on a piece-work basis (3 krónur per barrel).<sup>11</sup> If there was no fish the women got no pay and sometimes went hungry unless the fishermen gave them food. The women lived together in dormitories and the work was long and hard. During the winters she worked as a housekeeper in a rich household doing all the domestic work. The conditions were pleasanter and the pay better than in the herring station, but Guðrún recalled it took her a month to save the money to buy cloth for a winter coat. During the war she attended the local "housewives school" (húsmæðraskóli) to learn more about weaving, sewing and cooking. The course lasted three months and cost 2,000 krónur, a considerable sum at the time. She put these skills to use when working as a housekeeper again, this time in Reykjavík.

On returning to the village she was a housekeeper for a while but then worked in the newly opened freezing factory. She had a child and married. Her husband was a fisherman and the family kept some sheep which meant that Guðrún did haymaking and processed the meat after slaughtering. During the 1950s when she had three small children she took in boarders to make money. They were also fishermen and had to be provided with hot food whenever they returned from the sea - day or night. When her children grew up Guðrún returned to working part-time in the fish-factory.

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11. One króna was worth about ten old English pennies then.

### 3.5. The Contemporary Situation

In 1978 when 219 people lived in Fróneyri the majority (32) of the 56 households consisted of nuclear families. Other two-generation households were three mothers living with their children, and a brother and sister and her child. Thirteen households were of one generation: elderly single people and married couples, young couples with no children, a brother and sister sharing a house. Only seven households contained three generations, the additional generation being an elderly parent or small grandchild. A point to note is that all households were composed of relatives, there being nobody living on parish charity, no resident domestic servants, housekeepers or lodgers, apart from myself. (One household for part of the year consisted of the imported foreign workers).

These modern homes contrasted in the extreme with the farmhouses of 1820 and even the houses of 1940. All had piped water and sewage disposal, electricity, inside toilets, bathrooms and central heating. From being the place where all work, which provided the subsistence and exchange goods was carried out, the Icelandic home has become the site of domestic work only in the restricted sense of childraising and housekeeping. This unpaid work was carried out by the housewife alone. As a consequence of the home no longer being the centre of production there were no longer people earning a living by doing domestic work: domestic servants no longer existed.

Opportunities to make a cash income in the home were restricted and only a few women engaged in such work. Two women took in boarders. Guðrún, the woman with whom I

stayed, started to do so in 1958 as was described in section 3.4.6. During the late 1960s when she returned to work in the fish-factory part-time she had a young boy to stay during the summer months. In the summer, town children were often sent to the countryside and adults arrived to help with the hay harvest. Whether these visitors paid for their board and lodging depended on their relationship with the host family and the extent of their work on the farm.

One young woman gave the influx of summer guests as her main reason for delaying a decision on taking up the farming life: "It's like an Edda hotel<sup>12</sup> here in the summer" she said. Another Fróneyri woman, who took in children during the summer, said in 1978 that she would not continue to do so because it involved too much effort. During the winter months there were rarely visitors in the village and the fish-factory housed the foreign workers, so letting out rooms provided only a sporadic income. This was also true as regards providing food for transient workers. In the summer of 1978 one woman provided lunch and coffee for some post office engineers for a few weeks in the summer.

Eggs were sold by one woman. The hens laid about one kilo per day, varying with the season. The price rose from 650 krónur (£1) to 820 krónur (£1.26) per kilo from February to September 1978. With deductions for feed, the income the woman obtained was only about 3,500 krónur (£5.40) a week.

It was not possible to get a regular income from doing handwork such as knitting, sewing or upholstery either. Every woman could knit and provided the family needs for socks and jumpers so there was no market for them in the village itself.

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12. Edda hotels are the boarding schools, opened as tourist accommodation during the summer.

Fróneyri is off the main tourist routes so there was little opportunity to sell to foreigners. In general knitting Icelandic jumpers for sale is a phenomenon of the towns where they can be readily marketed.<sup>13</sup> There was one woman in Fróneyri who was skilled at upholstery and who was paid to do such work occasionally.

There were two other types of work apart from house-work and child-care, which were done in a domestic setting: gardening and keeping a few sheep. The summer season was so brief and the soil so poor that few flowers or crops could be grown. Some of the older houses in the village had a small flower garden in a sheltered spot, which had a small lawn, mountain ash tree and hardy flowers such as pansies. Separate from this was a kitchen garden where the main crops grown were potatoes and rhubarb. A few people also planted carrots and lettuce but most thought it a waste of time to attempt to grow these. However, enough potatoes were grown by most families to last through the winter and the rhubarb was made into jam by the women or stored in the deep freeze.

Sheep small-holding entailed making hay in the summer, rounding up and clipping the sheep and feeding the animals twice daily, when they were housed during the winter. There was a division of labour applied to the work necessary to maintain a flock of sheep. During haymaking both men and women raked the grass to dry it in the sun, but cutting the grass with scythes or mowing machines was exclusively a male job. Both men and women took part in the two round-ups, to

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13. Until recently this was typically low paid outwork, controlled by the major wool firm. The formation of the Handknitting Association of Icelandic by the outworkers themselves has done something to break the monopoly and raise prices and wages.



collect the sheep for clipping and to bring them off the mountains for the winter. On the whole, men clipped the sheep, although some younger women did it. The other work the women did during the round-ups and shearing was providing cakes and coffee to those who had taken part. The sheep were slaughtered in abattoirs and the dressed carcasses returned to the owners. Most of the meat was preserved in deep freezes but blood and liver sausages and paté were made by the women.

Keeping a few sheep (in this area about 20 could be over-wintered on the hay from a hectare of grass) did not result in a big income supplement. The cured fleeces sold for about 7,000 krónur (£10.76) in the shops, so the small-holders got a small cash return. The main economic benefit was in the form of a saving because the slaughtered lambs gave enough meat to last a year. For the households that kept a few sheep the motive appeared not to have been entirely economic because they spoke of it as being a hobby; something which was a link to their farming past.

The farms were somewhat different, since work was orientated around the home and carried out by family members. Farmers' wives who do milking, lambing, haymaking and accounts are distinguished linguistically by the term bóndakona in place of housewife húsmóðir. In 1975 two of the reasons given by the organising committee for holding a strike by women referred to farm women. Their work was undervalued because it was estimated to be worth only about £500 per annum and they were not admitted as full members of the Farmers' Union. The work on the farms had been made somewhat less physically arduous by the introduction of machinery and centralised processing. Mowing machines could be used on

flat hayfields, although scythes and rakes still had to be used on hilly and stony land. Milking was still done by hand, because the climate in this area meant dairying was of minor importance. Investment in milking machines was not economically viable. The milk which was produced was collected and processed at dairies. It was not made into dairy products on the farm. Similarly, sheep were slaughtered at an abattoir and wool no longer had to be cleaned and processed on the farm as it had until the 1950s. The fleeces were simply sent off to the wool mills.

The overall gender-related division of labour was such that men were full-time wage earners while women had the dual role of wage earner and housewife.

Table 9. Main Occupations in Fróneyri 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
Children under 15	29	40
Student 15+	12	10
Retired	5	4
Disabled	2	1
Fish-factory workers	32	27
Full-time housewives	12	-
Farming	6	9
Shopwork	4	2
Schoolteaching	2	1
Driver	1	-
Post Office	1	-
Mechanic	-	2
Fishing	-	16
Village Mayor	-	1
	106	113

Source: Fieldwork

In this table people are classified according to their main occupation or status<sup>14</sup>. There was movement between jobs, usually on a seasonal basis. The students and older school-

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14. The women classified as retired were over the official retirement age of 67. Three of them and both the disabled women did housework, so they could have been included with the full-time housewives. The disabled people themselves gave their handicap as the reason for non-participation in waged work so I have classed them separately.

children worked in the fish-factory during the summer, as did two of the schoolteachers. Four of the farmers' wives took fish-factory jobs in the winter months when there was less to do on the farms and a fifth worked there part-time throughout the year. Two older men who kept a few sheep concentrated on them from May to October, returning to fish-factory work during the winter. Young men who had not got a regular place on a fishing boat also worked in the fish-factory.

A whole type of women's work, domestic service, had disappeared but so had the artisan work which men had done at the turn of the century. There were no longer tin and iron smiths, carpenters, cobblers and shipwrights because industrialised manufacturing had replaced them. For both men and women the employment opportunities in the village were extremely narrow. Anyone with a vocational or professional training almost inevitably chose to move to another part of the country.

As regards work carried out in the home, much of the sheer physical drudgery of housework had been eliminated by the advent of services and utilities and the whole range of household appliances. The installation of central heating and supply of piped water meant that no longer were long hours spent cutting peat or fetching water from streams. Other aspects of the work had disappeared entirely too. An individual household did not have to get its food from the land or sea and process it from the raw state; clothing was not made from homegrown wool, nor quilts from eiderdown. Shopping for manufactured goods had replaced these activities. On the other hand some aspects of housework had become greatly elaborated. Meals were more varied, the house cleaned weekly

at least and the greater quantity of clothing was laundered more frequently than the once or twice a year of the previous century. Painting and decorating was a new type of work which needed to be done in the home.

Parts of the educational and caring role of the home had also been removed. In this rural area, children did not start school until seven years of age and it was expected that they would be taught to read and write in the home. Thereafter education was provided at school. Care of the sick and childbirth took place in hospitals. The social security system had replaced the parish relief for the elderly and unemployed. In Fróneyri some families did look after old or disabled relatives but there was institutional provision available if a family was unable to provide such care.

Co-operation between women in the different households was on the whole limited to stepping in at times of crisis such as when the housewife was sick; lending utensils and furniture and suggesting recipes when a party was being held or offering to pick something up at the shops. A mother would take some of the load off her daughter's shoulders when she was learning to cope with a new baby. It was as regards childcare that a degree of organised co-operation was shown. Older women, who had given up paid work, minded children for those who had waged work, or women worked alternate shifts in the fish-factory and cared for each other's children when at home. During my time in Fróneyri the women were discussing the setting up of a crèche in the village, since the existing arrangements did not cater for all the women of the village.

Prior To Diversification  
Of The Economy

Within The Household

(Not all members necessarily kin.  
Waged and unwaged labour. Gender-  
related division of labour and  
differential wage rates)

- 1) Biological reproduction
- 2) Social reproduction. House-  
keeping, education and care  
of the sick and indigent
- 3) Production. Food and other  
goods for consumption and  
exchange

Figure viii Form and Functions of the  
Household Before and After  
Diversification of the  
Economy

After Diversification Of The Economy

A Within The Household

(Members exclusively kin. Unwaged  
labour by housewife)

- 1) Biological reproduction
- 2) Social reproduction. Housekeeping.  
Educational/caring functions reduced.
- 3) Production. Very minor amounts for  
consumption and exchange except in  
the case of farming households

B Outside The Household

- 1) Production. Fish factories etc.  
Waged labour. Gender-related  
division of labour and differential  
wage rates
- 2) Social reproduction. Schools, hospitals,  
social security provisions. Waged labour

### 3.6. Conclusions

When I lived in Fróneyri, I noticed that public notices were displayed in two places: the door of the fish-factory and the window of the shop. I felt that this epitomised the contemporary situation because money was earned in the factory and spent in the shop. They were the two places most people would go at sometime during the week.

At times it felt as if the whole of life was geared to the rhythm of the trawler: its comings and goings. When the trawler came in, the size of the catch and the number of day's work it would provide was discussed at length. We speculated as to whether we would be called into work at the weekend or earlier in the mornings, in order to finish the old fish or make a start on a big new catch. The village and national economy still depends on the exploitation of the sea. The work is now carried out by waged workers in the factories.

In this chapter the changes in the economy, occupational structure and household composition in one Icelandic parish over 150 years, have been described. In the nineteenth century, work to produce goods for consumption and exchange was household-based; therefore domestic work in the first sense specified by Mackintosh (op.cit.:175). The households always had a core of closely related kinsfolk but many were extended by servants, other relatives, parish paupers, fostered children and lodgers.

When the fishing and agricultural sectors expanded and diversified, new types of specialised sea and land based occupations opened up for men. A parallel process did not take place as regards job opportunities for women. A few specialised as midwives or children's nurses but general

domestic work or fish processing, the lowest paid sector of the fishing industry, was all that was available to the majority. Domestic service disappeared during the course of this century.

Today domestic work means the particular tasks of housekeeping and child raising which are carried out by a woman, alone in the home, and for which she receives no wages. In the past the Icelandic homes may have been physically isolated from one another but the composition of the households meant that there were a number of adults and children around, participating in the work done there. Today, although the houses are closer together in the village, women who are full-time housewives are more socially isolated. Those I knew in this position often spoke of their lack of company and I vividly remember meeting someone in the street after I had had a week's break from the fish-factory, "Hallo" she said, "I thought you were dead". I was highly visible in the village, yet a week out of the fish-factory was a little social death. The woman who hailed me was quite well aware of this and was, through her ironic comment, drawing attention to it.

CHAPTER FOUR - CONTEMPORARY ICELAND: WAGED WORK4.1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter a review of the census data from Fróneyri was used to illuminate the historical working role of Icelandic women. The following two chapters are an account of the modern situation, analysing first waged work and secondly domestic work.

As Barker and Allen noted, the perceived separation between home and workplace has on the whole been reflected in studies by social scientists of industrial society (1976:2). Studies were made of the family or of work. Research on the family has not, until recently paid much attention to work done by women in the home, childrearing, unpaid domestic work and low paid occupations such as out-work and childminding. Two failings of the research carried out on waged work were that either employees were treated as unisex, meaning that the gender-related division of labour was ignored; or conversely, if attention was paid to gender, particularly when the focus was on women, the analysis was couched in terms of women themselves being problematic. The assumption that western society makes: that men are the main breadwinners while women's primary responsibility is to their home and children, was followed by the social scientists. Thus studies of women at work looked at the problems created for employers and society as a whole, when women took paid jobs (Brown, 1976:21).

The physical separation of the home from other institutions in society has been used by some authors to propose a theoretical opposition between domestic and



public spheres of life.

"Although I would be the last to call this a necessary arrangement or to deny that it is far too simple as an account of any particular empirical case, I suggest that the opposition between domestic and public orientations (an opposition that must, in part, derive from the nurturant capacities of women) provides the necessary framework for an examination of male and female roles in any society".

(Rosaldo, 1974:24)

Rosaldo stated that her definition of domestic was "...those minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organised immediately around one or more mothers and their children" (ibid:23). The other category, the public, covers everything else and is the area of male activity. Even as a heuristic model this distinction is problematic because of the conflating of 'the domestic' and 'the private' which are seen as insulated from the 'public'. Chapter three demonstrated that such a situation is culturally and historically specific, not universal.

Rosaldo also presents a 'hot stove' argument, that childrearing determines women's role in society.

"Women become absorbed primarily in domestic activities because of their role as mothers. Their economic and practical activities are contained by the responsibilities of child care, and the focus of their emotions and attentions is particularistic and directed toward children and the home".

(ibid:24)

Arguments from Durkheim and Simmel were used by Rosaldo to support the view that women are excluded from the extra-domestic sphere of society. When specific societies are considered this view is shown to be inadequate. The length of time spent 'absorbed' in childrearing is highly variable and does not of necessity mean the exclusion of women, in

all cultures, from participation in economic activities nor the political life of society. What constitutes the 'domestic', 'private' and 'public' in different societies; indeed whether those are relevant categories, has to be investigated rather than assumed to have universal significance.

As Barker and Allen emphasised we should not start from a position of seeing domestic and public areas of life in opposition since they are inextricably intertwined (op.cit.:3). Using an integrated approach it is possible to analyse, in an industrial society for instance, the significance of women's total working role: their unpaid domestic labour and how this supports the industrial work sector, the distinctive part women play in the paid labour force and how the demands of this role reflects back on domestic arrangements.

In order to carry out this type of integrated analysis the employment structure in Fróneyri is described and analysed in detail, and reference is made to the surveys of waged labour participation in Iceland. Work in the fish-factory is then described with particular attention to the gender-related division of labour and the popular beliefs which both help to create and justify this division. This is followed by a discussion of the usefulness of dual labour market theory in explaining the situation in the fishing industry in particular and the division of labour in industrial society as a whole.

#### 4.2. The Employment Structure

As the previous chapter demonstrated there has never been a long period in Iceland's history when large numbers of women were excluded from the productive working life.

They were fully involved in the pre-industrial farming/fishing work and as the economy changed they took part in fish processing, other industries and service occupations. The harsh life in Iceland, the country's exploited colonial status and late industrialisation meant that an indigenous middle class hardly developed in the nineteenth century. Just a few Danish officials, foreign and Icelandic merchants and professional people had a life which was anything more than a struggle for existence. An ideal of women being protected from the market place and manual labour had no chance of being realised in practice, in the face of everyday reality in Iceland (c.f. Davidoff, 1976:122). This is not to say that such an ethos was totally absent. In the novel Salka Valka, set at the turn of the century, one theme is the contrast between the life of the eponymous heroine, a woman who worked in the fishing industry and the merchant's daughter who had a life of leisure (Laxness, 1951). Numerically such middle class women were very few. Of more significance was women's involvement in the paid labour force, their concept of themselves as workers and early involvement in trades unions and industrial action (see section 7.6.).

In more recent times the recorded involvement of married women in paid labour has risen quite dramatically. In 1963, 36.6% of married women had some kind of employment and this rose to 52.4% in 1970 (Vilhjálmisdóttir, 1976:87). By the late 1970s the figure had risen about 70% (Þjóðviljinn, 3.3.79; Forsætisráðuneytið, 1977:87). It should be borne in mind that women only leave paid work for limited periods; there is no expectation of giving up paid employment throughout married life. Comparable diachronic figures are not

available for single women, but one study found that 74.6% had a paid job (Broddason og Karlsson 1978:6,17,19). The national picture was reflected in Fróneyri, where 75% of the 77 women (married and single) had a job outside the home.

The majority of the people lived and worked in the village itself. There was little commuting to other villages or towns because of the distances involved and the lack of any other opportunities there. Winter conditions made travel difficult, even dangerous. The road was cleared of snow a couple of times a week to allow the doctor and food supplies through. The only people who did choose to travel to work regularly were a man employed in a shop in a neighbouring village, another man who was a regional fish-factory inspector and one woman who, for personal reasons, preferred working in another fish-factory. Some of the younger seamen occasionally went to other villages to get a trip on a boat, but this did not involve daily commuting. The fish-factory was the only major employer: this was a one-industry village with a small service sector. The six farms located further up the valley, away from the village, were worked by family members some of whom also worked in the fish-factory.

The table overleaf shows the work of those aged over 15, the school leaving age.

The students are considered wage earners because for a significant period in the year, up to five months, they took paid work in order to contribute to the cost of their studies. The women students all worked in the factory, as did some of the men, but the latter also had opportunities to go fishing or work on road construction. The other

Table 10. Those Aged 15+ Earning a Wage

	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
Students	12	10
Fish-factory full-time	8	22
Fish-factory part-time	15	-
Fish-factory seasonal/occasional	9	4
Shop work	4	2
Farming	6	9
School Teaching	2	1
Driver	1	-
Post Office	1	-
Mechanic	-	2
Fishing	-	16
Village Mayor	-	1
Fish-factory Inspectorate	-	1
	<hr style="width: 100%; border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>	<hr style="width: 100%; border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>
	58	68

Source: Fieldwork

people are classified according to their main occupation but individuals did work in more than one area. This applied particularly to the farming families. Four of the bóndakonur (farmers' wives) worked seasonally in the factory while one worked there part-time during the whole year. Two of the male farmers also took seasonal work in the factory as did their children. The fish-factory also provided occasional employment for others: the school teachers, driver and some of the fishermen.

The table shows the limited opportunities in the village for non-fish-factory work. Only eight women and 31 men had such jobs, 16 of the men being fishermen. A significant difference can be seen in the employment pattern of men and women in the factory itself. Only a minority of the women worked full-time, that is from 8 am to 7 pm daily throughout the year, while the majority of the men were full-time employees. No men worked part-time, that is either the morning or afternoon shift, whereas the majority of women did so. The following

sections give a detailed picture of the people doing different types of work in Fróneyri. The tables give age, marital status and ages of children living at home.

#### 4.2.1. The Farming Families

Table 11. The Farming Families<sup>1</sup>

Farm No.	<u>1</u>		<u>2</u>		<u>3</u>		<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>		<u>6</u>	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	M	F	M
Individual's no.	1	+ 2 <del>xx</del>	3	+ 4 <del>xxx</del>	5	+ 6	7	8	+ 9	9	+ 10
Ages	42	60	50	61	53	52	56	57	57	71	77
Marital status	S	S	Ma		Ma		W	Ma		Ma	
Ages of children	25	-	16		22		29	23		-	
			15		20		25	16		-	
			10		17		23				
					12		16				
							11				

Key: F = female, M = male  
 Ma = married, S = single  
 W = widowed, ~~xx~~ = brother and sister  
~~xxx~~ = male relative worked on the farm

Source: Fieldwork, íbúaskrá

The table shows that farming was carried out by four middle-aged to elderly married couples and one middle-aged brother and sister, helped by their children (and other relatives in one case). The other farm was worked by a widow and her three unmarried sons who were the only young men who farmed full-time. This pattern, as well as the fact that five farms in the commune had been abandoned since 1960, and the sale of one of the farms during my period of fieldwork to become a holiday home (not a working farm), indicate the decline of farming in the area. Only one young couple were contemplating taking up farming when the elderly couples, Nos. 9 and 10 retired, but they had

1. This table, reflecting the fact that the farms were family enterprises, is arranged on a household basis. Subsequent tables are ordered by occupations.

made no definite decision. The small size of the farms, (the largest had 200 sheep and 6 cows), the seasonal cycle and the fact that the bulk of the farm income was received after the autumn slaughtering, resulted in some members of the farming families taking part in waged labour, either in the fish-factory or at sea, to provide a cash income throughout the year.

#### 4.2.2. Non-Fish-factory Workers

Table 12. Non-Fish-factory Workers

##### WOMEN

Individual's no.	11	12	13*	14	15	16	17	18
Age	17	20	21	23	28	32	37	76
Marital Status	S	S	Ma	C	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	-	-	-	-	6	14	18	-
					3	12	17	
						7	15	
							6	

##### MEN

Individual's no.	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Age	24	28	30	33	37	50	72
Marital Status	S	Ma	Ma	C	Ma	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	-	6	10	7	14	23	-
		3	7		12	21	
			5		7	18	
						14	

Key: C = unmarried couple,  
 Ma = married,  
 S = single,  
 \* = married to a fisherman

Source: Fieldwork, íbúaskrá

All three of the schoolteachers (13, 14, 22) had been brought up and educated in other parts of Iceland. The two women had come to Fróneyri with their partners and planned to live there permanently. The male teacher had come because the job was available and in the autumn of 1978 moved away from Fróneyri to another area, taking his partner with him.

The shop workers fell into three groups, an elderly couple, Nos. 18 and 25, who owned their small business, the three women, 11, 12 and 15, who ran the village shop and thirdly the man, No. 20, who commuted daily to another village. The other two women, the driver (16) and post-mistress (17), had jobs which were possible to combine with housekeeping responsibilities. The driver's work took a couple of hours a day, taking the post to the main town and the post office was in the woman's house. In both cases their youngest children were at or near school age.

The other men with non-fish-factory jobs all had an education or expertise which they could use in the village. The mayor (19) was one of the few people resident in Fróneyri who had a higher academic education, the mechanics (21,23) had their practical training and had set up their own business and the fish-factory inspector (24) had a lifetime's experience of that industry.

#### 4.2.3. The Students

All but two of the 22 (12 female, 10 male) students were single and without children. One woman, at college in Reykjavík, hoped to get a place in a crèche or a baby minder for her child, while a male student's wife looked after their child. The younger students aged 16 to 18 were completing their academic education at various schools in the country. The older ones were doing vocational courses: nursing, commercial studies, secretarial studies, art, design and seamanship.



4.2.4. The Seasonal/Occasional Fish-factory WorkersTable 13. Seasonal/Occasional Fish-factory WorkersWOMEN

Individual's no.	26	27 <del>/</del>	28	29	30 <del>/</del>	31 <del>/</del>	32	33	34
Age	21	22	23	23	26	36	59	61	76
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	S	S	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	1	3	3	-	-	11,5	21	-	-

MEN

Individual's no.	35	36	37	38
Age	18	25	66	76
Marital Status	S	S	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	-	-	-	-

Key: Ma = married  
 S = single  
~~/~~ = married to fishermen

Source: Fieldwork, íbúaskrá

The seasonal workers were the three older women, Nos. 5, 32, 33 and 34, who worked during the busy vertið (fishing season). One of them said she worked in the winter when it was cold and dark and there was little else to do, but took the summer off to enjoy the weather, garden and visit relatives. Added to which the work in the winter was regular and settled, whereas in the summer it was disrupted because the catches were smaller and there were a lot of children and students in the factory and she did not like the unsettled atmosphere. The young woman, No. 29, was a farmer's daughter who switched to farm work during the summer months. The seasonal male workers were the three sheep small-holders (35,37,38) and a farmer's son who worked in the factory during the winter (36).

The occasional workers were the three young women with children under four years of age plus No. 31 a rather sick woman who worked when she felt strong enough and No. 30 whose husband was said to disapprove of her working. She was the only woman in the village of whom such a thing was said and she only worked a day now and again when he was at sea. One of the young women with a small child felt she had enough to do in looking after the home and raising her child but worked a week or so when she needed money to buy something expensive or planned a trip to Reykjavík.

#### 4.2.5. Part-time Fish-factory Workers

All the women part-time workers were either married or living with a man and had fairly grown up families. Six had one child under school age for whom arrangements had to be made during working hours. Such children were either left in the care of older children during school holidays or with other women. Another characteristic common to most of the part-time working women was that their husbands had jobs on land. Only two had husbands who were fishermen while one had a retired husband and another's was disabled.

Table 14. Part-time Fish-factory Workers (All Women)

Individual's No.	39	40	41	42	43	44	45 <del>/</del>	46
Age	24	28	28	29	33	34	36	41
Marital Status	C	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	C	Ma
Ages of Children	7	9,8	11,6	12,10	12,10 9,6	12,10 4	17,16 5	4
Individual's No.	47 <del>/</del>	48	49	50	51	52	53	
Age	45	45	46	49	49	51	55	
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	
Ages of Children	22,18 9	23,21 16,14	18,6	23,21 18,14	25,19 17,15 13	20,12	20,15	

Key: C = unmarried couple, ma = married  
~~/~~ = married to fishermen

Source: Fieldwork íbúaskrá

#### 4.2.6. Full-time Fish-factory Workers

The eight women in this category fall into three groups. First Nos. 61 and 55 who were mother and daughter and the main breadwinners of their family since the husband had left. Second were the young women, Nos. 54 and 56 who were working in the factory for a year prior to going abroad to study and travel. The other four women were distinguishable from all the other women workers in that they did not work on the shop floor processing fish. They were the leading hand, junior quality control inspector, office secretary and canteen cook.

The age of the men who worked in the factory ranged from school leaving age to above retirement (officially 67 years for both men and women). In contrast to women, the large majority of the men worked full-time and held a variety of posts: manager, accountant, shopfloor manager, head quality control inspector, electrician, engineer, fishmeal machine operators, gutting machine operators, carpenter, lorry driver, boat unloaders, freezing and storage-room workers.

Table 15. Full-time Fish-factory Workers

WOMEN

Individual's No.	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61
Age	18	19	20	25	35	41	47	52
Marital Status	S	S	S	S	Ma	Ma	S	D
Age of Children	-	-	-	-	14, 13 12, 2	20, 18 16, 14	-	19, 18 14, 12

MEN

Individual's No.	62	63	64	65	66	67	68
Age	17	19	19	21	21	24	29
Marital Status	S	S	S	Ma	S	C	Ma
Age of Children	-	-	-	1	-	-	9, 8

Individual's No.	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76
Age	30	32	33	35	35	35	41	41
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Age of Children	11, 6	12, 10	12, 10 9, 6	14, 13 12, 2	4	12, 10 4	18, 17 15, 6	16, 8 3

Individual's No.	77	78	79	80	81	82	83
Age	43	46	56	57	59	59	72
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	Ma	S	Ma	Ma	Ma
Age of Children	20, 18 16, 14	23, 21 18, 14	20, 15	-	20, 12	20	-

Key: C = unmarried couple  
 D = divorced  
 Ma = married  
 S = single

Source: Fieldwork íbúaskrá

4.2.7. Full-time Housewives

Table 16. Full-time Housewives

Individual's No.	84	85 <del>♀</del>	86 <del>♀</del>	87	88 <del>♀</del>	89 <del>♀</del>	90 <del>♀</del>
Age	20	22	24	28	29	31	31
Marital Status	C	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Age of Children	4	2	4, 1	10, 7 5	7, 3	9, 6	12, 8 6

Individual's No.	91 <del>♀</del>	92	93	94	95
Age	31	43	44	63	65
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	S	Ma	W
Age of Children	9, 8 2	16, 8 3	20, 19 17, 15, 13, 12	-	-

Key: C = unmarried couple, ma = married,  
 S = single, W = widowed,  
 ♀ = married to fishermen

Source: Fieldwork íbúaskrá

These women fell into two groups; two older women and the young women with young families, six of whom had husbands who were fishermen. The two women who appear to fall into neither category, Nos. 92 and 93, had particular elements in their lives which probably explained their non-involvement in wage work. One had children who were not very healthy and the other had been left by her partner as head of a large household of five children and one grandchild.

#### 4.2.8. Fishermen

The ages of the fishermen clearly show that this was a profession for young men. None were over 50 and the majority were under 30 years of age. Three of the men, Nos. 103, 109 and 110, owned their own small fishing boats while the others were crew members of the trawler or small boats. The younger seamen did not always work in boats operating from Fróneyri itself but sometimes took a trip on boats from other localities.

Table 17. Fishermen

Individual's No.	96	97	98	99	100	101	102	103
Age	18	20	22	23	24	24	25	25
Marital Status	S	C	S	S	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	-	1	-	-	3	2	4,1	-
Individual's No.	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111
Age	27	27	31	34	35	38	44	47
Marital Status	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma	Ma
Ages of Children	-	7,3	9,8 2	12,8 6	17,16 5	9,6	22,18 9	11,5

Key: C = unmarried couple  
Ma = married  
S = single

Source: Fieldwork íbúaskrá

#### 4.3. Factors Affecting Employment Opportunities and Choices

It is clear that the main choice for men was between fishing and a land-based occupation. Fishing offered the chance of a much higher income than most jobs on land but had the drawbacks of some physical danger, and the disruption it caused to family life. Fishermen got a guaranteed income even if they did not sail because of bad weather or if the catch was very poor. Once the tonnage of fish caught rose above a certain level they got a share of the value of the fish divided into shares thus: captain 2, first engineer, bosun 1.1/2, second engineer, cook 1.1/4, deckhands 1. In the summer of 1978 a deckhand would get 300,000 krónur (£460) for a catch above 120 tons and 480,000 krónur (£740) for a catch of 200 tons.<sup>2</sup> One fisherman, a deckhand, said that averaged over a year of good and bad trips he would expect to make 200,000 krónur (£310) per trip, giving a yearly income of £6,000 plus, depending on the number of sailings undertaken. For those above the level of deckhand the rewards could be very large. One man earned 3,000,000 krónur in just three trips and a total of 7,000,000 krónur (£11,000) in the seven months January to July 1978.

The wages were calculated differently on a small boat with 50% going to the owner/captain and the crew getting 15% each. The earnings of a crewmember of a small boat which brought in 6.5 tons of prawns valued at 184 krónur per kilo was therefore 180,000 krónur (£280) for a two to three day trip. Small boat fishing is more weather

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2. The exchange rate was continually falling because of inflation. I have taken 650 krónur = £1 for 1978 as an average.

dependent than trawler fishing, so trips and income were spread irregularly throughout the year. The owner of such a small boat reported that his yearly income for 1978 was 6,000,000 krónur (£9,230).

Despite the attraction of such high earnings only a minority of the men in the village were fishermen. Age was one reason; the rigours of the life meant that men tended to leave the sea in middle age. The other consideration was the long periods away from home for those on trawlers (up to a fortnight), which was not viewed as wholly compatible with marriage and raising a family. One couple said that they had definitely made the decision that the husband would not go to sea, although he had qualifications which would have given him a good position on a trawler, because they both disliked the long periods he would spend away from home.

There were three strategies used by the fishermen to ameliorate the difficulties their job created for family life. Those that held a position above deckhand and had very high earnings did not go on every trip the trawler made. This also made economic sense because if they went on every fishing trip their income would put them into a higher tax band and they would not actually increase their net earnings by very much. Three men owned their own small boats which meant that they were away from home for a maximum of four days at a time and could themselves choose when they sailed. Lastly, there was one family which planned to live temporarily in the village, the husband making as much money as possible at sea, before they moved to another part of the country and the man gave up fishing. His wife greatly disliked life in the village and his being at sea but was prepared to live

there for the necessary few years.

The choice of work on land was restricted, as the tables show. Farming inevitably had to be combined with another waged occupation and the opportunities for those with a higher education were very small. This left the fish-factory as the largest employer in the village.

The major factors which determined women's degree of involvement in the labour force appear to be the age of their children and their husband's occupation. The link between the farm women's seasonal working in the fish-factory and the cycle of work on the farm is clear. The summer season started in May with the lambing, followed by hay making during July, August and September. The sheep were rounded up during the summer to be sheared and again in the autumn to be slaughtered. The women took part in the haymaking, shearing and rounding up of the sheep. The amount of housework also increased because friends and relatives, who needed to be looked after, came for holidays and to help with the farmwork.

There was also a correlation between full-time housewives and fishermen as half of these women had husbands who went to sea. Three fishermen were married to women who worked very occasionally in the factory while two of the women who worked part-time had husbands who were small boat owners, not trawlermen. None of the women full-time fish-factory workers were married to fishermen. This suggests that the fact that their husbands were the highest earners in the village was an important consideration for women who were full-time housewives. However, it should also be remembered that the fishermen were on the whole young men with young families. The average age of the children of



full-time housewives was 8.7 years while the average age of children belonging to all the other women who worked in the fish-factory was 12.8. Having a number of small children at home was thus another reason for the housewives' non-participation in waged labour. It therefore seems that it was the combination of having small children and a husband earning a high wage which explains the connection between fishermen and full-time housewives.

Family responsibilities was a factor to be considered when deciding between full and part-time factory work. A regular morning or afternoon shift was the characteristic working pattern of married women with school age children. In addition the nature of the work itself was important in dissuading the majority of women from doing it full-time. It is a very taxing job as is made clear later in the chapter. Those who did work full-time were the mother and daughter who provided the only income for their family, the two young women trying to save money in a short period and the four women who did not do the routine table work on the factory floor.

There was a very limited choice of occupation in Fróneyri, which largely explains the falling population and loss of young people from the village. Men did have the opportunity of going to sea and getting high wages but this was not an option for women. Age was of some importance in determining men's employment choices but age and stage of life-cycle was of more significance in shaping women's participation in the paid labour force.

4.3.1. National Comparisons

The patterns revealed in the foregoing analysis of the involvement of women in the paid labour force in a single locality/town are supported by the data obtained in a number of surveys carried out in Iceland generally during the 1970s. In a sample questionnaire survey of the men and women aged between 21 and 54 in the towns of Garðabae (pop. 4,091), Neskaupsstaður (pop. 1,665), Hafnarfjörður (pop. 11,601) and Kópavogur (pop. 12,553), Broddason and Karlsson (op.cit.) found the following results:

Table 18. Married and Unmarried Women and Men in the Paid Labour Force

	<u>G</u>		<u>N</u>		<u>H</u>		<u>K</u>		<u>Totals</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<u>Waged work</u>										
Married women	112	48.9	73	55.4	334	57	254	54.6	773	54.6
Unmarried women	11	64.7	5	100	36	85.7	36	66.7	88	74.6
Married/ unmarried men	236	98.7	148	99.3	601	97.2	475	95.4	1460	97

Key: G = Garðabae  
N = Neskaupsstaður  
H = Hafnarfjörður  
K = Kópavogur

Source: Compiled from tables 3.5b, 3.5c, 3.5d Broddason og Karlsson, 1978:16,17,19

The information obtained on the average working day demonstrated that women were much more likely to do part-time work than men. In the four locations the percentage of men doing fewer than seven hours per day was only 2.4% but for women the figure ranged between 45% and 53%. The

conclusion of the authors was that:

"The data on the working hours and occupational status of men and women shows unmistakably that women work in waged labour less than men; the working hours of those that do work are shorter than men's and much points to the conclusion that they form a higher percentage than men in low paid jobs".

(ibid:21)

Another study (Forsætisráðuneytið, op.cit.) carried out under the auspices of the Women's Year Committee in 1976 in other towns, including the capital, also confirmed that the majority of women do play a part in the labour market but tended to do part-time work. This survey looked exclusively at married women and men aged between 25 and 55 in Reykjavík (pop. 84,423), Patreksfjörður (pop. 1,026), Húsavík (pop. 2,191) and Egilsstaðir (pop. 911). In order to obtain information on farmers' wives, 82 of them from all parts of the country were also included in the survey. The results for the urban locations were as follows.

Table 19. Married Women and Men: Occupations

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Women</u>		<u>Men</u>		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Housework	83	37.6	1	0.5	
Full-time waged work	45	20.4)	145	65.6)	
Part-time waged work	81	36.7)	3	1.4)	93.2
Self-employed/ Employer	7	3.2)	58	26.2)	
Student	4	1.8	4	1.8	
No Information	1	0.4	10	4.5	
	<u>221</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>221</u>	<u>100</u>	

Source: Table 11.4  
Forsætisráðuneytið, 1977:89

The information supplied by farmers' wives showed that whereas they tended to identify themselves as housewives they described their husbands as self-employed/employers or as the húsbóndi, the man of the house.

Table 20. Occupations of Farming Couples

	<u>Farmers' Wives</u>		<u>Farmers</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%
<u>housewife/ húsbóndi</u>	44	69.8	8	12.7
full-time waged work	1	1.6	-	-
part-time waged work	3	4.8	1	1.6
self-employed/ employer	15	23.8	47	74.6
student	-	-	-	-
no information	-	-	7	11.1
	<u>63</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>100</u>

Source: Figures compiled from tables 11.2, 11.3, 11.4 Forsætisráðuneytið, 1977:87,88,89

Both these surveys also showed a significant difference in the educational achievement of men and women, with men having a greater participation in further education, both academic and vocational. Twice as many men as women had specialised vocational or academic training and four times as many men as women had obtained university level qualifications.

Women's lower academic achievement and tendency to have broken career histories because of their family responsibilities might appear to play an important part in accounting for their confinement to the lower paid section of the labour market.

However, a study carried out in 1972 by Svavarsdóttir and Aðalsteinsdóttir, (reported in Vilhjálmsdóttir, op.cit.), of the employment structure in the banking sector demonstrated that these were not sufficient explanations. The evidence did show that on average women bank employees did have a lower education than men but also established that women had a longer average working career. A detailed analysis of the different staff grades and pay bands revealed that even when women had an equal education and equal or longer employment record, as compared with men, they were still found in lower grade jobs. Comparative studies of shop and office workers also showed a similar pattern. Vilhjálmsdóttir commented:

"This tendency towards discrepancy in the classification in pay-groups of men and women with the same education and working experience doubtless applies in many other cases also, though research connected with this Report has only covered the afore-mentioned categories of workers. A large proportion of men with the same professional title as women are nevertheless in higher pay-groups, even in higher ones than provided for in pay agreements.

These conclusions clearly demonstrate that legal rights, the same working experience or longer, equal education and identical titles do not in practice suffice to ensure the same pay for women as for men. Here, other factors are responsible."

(ibid.:258)

Vilhjálmssdóttir's surveys considered office and service industry employees but she suggested that similar results might be found in other areas of employment. As regards the employment structure in Fróneyri, it has already been shown that women's domestic responsibilities are a crucial factor in shaping their involvement in waged labour, underlining the point that a simplistic distinction of home and work cannot be sustained. In the following analysis of the

major employer in Fróneyri - the fish-factory - a case study of industrial work which complements Vilhjálmsdóttir's research on white collar employment, the gender-related division of labour, indigenous ideologies which support this division and theories which further help to explain it, are considered. The analysis illuminates the 'other factors' to which Vilhjálmsdóttir alluded.

#### 4.4. The Fish-factory

To examine the division of labour in the fish-factory some understanding of the actual work process is needed. The factory was sited on the quayside where the fish was unloaded in large boxes using winches and forklift trucks. The first process the fish underwent was being gutted, skinned and sliced longitudinally in half on machines. At one time all the fish had to be gutted and filleted by hand but now only two varieties (catfish because of its strong teeth which wreck the machine, and ocean perch because of its small size) cannot be processed by machine. The second part of the processing was cleaning, weighing and packaging the fish, after which it only needed to be frozen, packed in cardboard boxes and stored.

All the women, except two, a secretary and cook, worked on the shop floor and there was only a small degree of job differentiation amongst the women, based upon age, not training. The younger women, aged 16 to 20 years, did jobs such as weighing the gutted fish into 20 kilo lots and carrying it to the conveyor belts, de-icing the freezing trays ready for re-use and generally fetching and carrying. Only two women had 'specialised' jobs. The leading hand

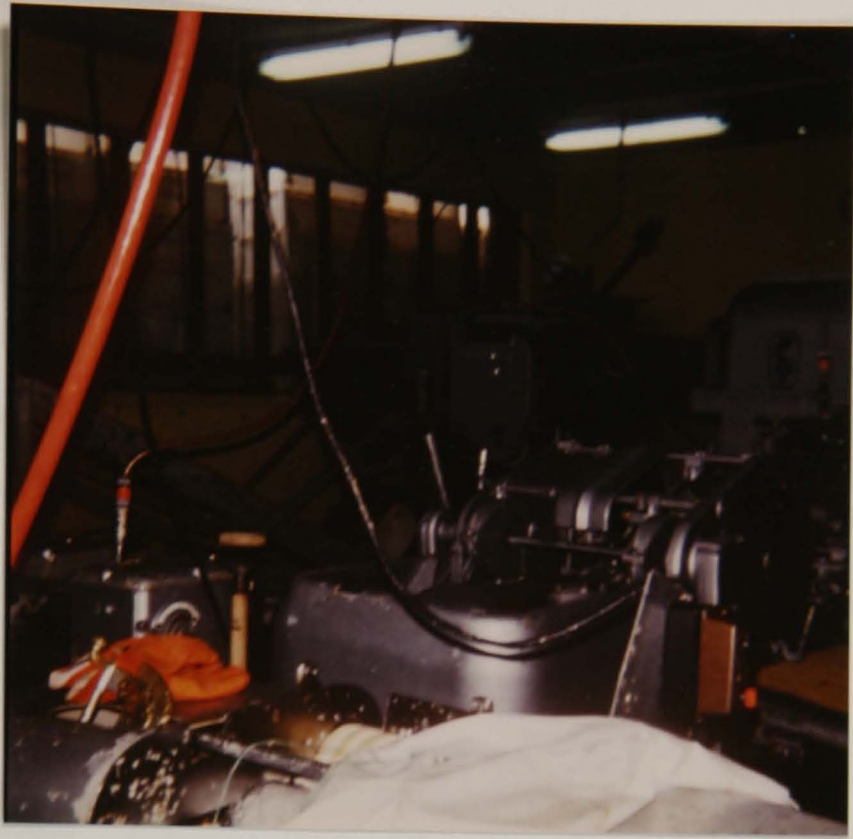


Figure ix The Fish-factory: The Gutting Machines



Figure x The Fish-factory: Men Working  
On The Gutting Machines

ensured things ran smoothly by seeing that enough packaging materials were available, that fish and freezing trays were distributed regularly to the tables and recorded the fish worked by each table. The deputy quality control inspector checked the packed fish for stray bones and worms and underweight boxes. The other women did table work which is described in detail later. All the other positions in the factory were held by men and as mentioned before, many had specialised jobs. None did work which was as unremittingly tedious as table work.

#### 4.4.1. Table Work

The job the majority of the women did in the factory, cleaning, weighing and packing the fish, required deftness and concentration. It takes about a week to learn the job, "get accustomed to the knife" as the Icelanders said, and learn familiarity with the different types of fish: cod, haddock, pollock, catfish and ocean perch. These fish all have their own peculiarities, haddock for example has a gill bone particularly difficult to remove. Fish also have to be weighed and packed in different ways. It takes somewhat longer than a week for the rhythm of the work to be inculcated in the body: slapping the fish onto the table, flicking out worms and bloodspots, cutting off decayed portions, locating the length of the backbone with the middle finger of the knife-free hand, slicing out this bone with three strokes, dividing the fish into three portions - fillet, tail and gill and tossing them onto the appropriate piles. Although it requires a rhythm it is not possible to do the work unthinkingly, since it takes concentration to locate all the small round worms which





Figure xi The Fish-factory: Women Table Workers

appear as shadows in the flesh and to weigh the fish within the narrow tolerances allowed.

It was arduous standing for hours. The factory was well lit and heated but eyestrain resulted from looking into the fluorescent lights which shone from below through the perspex tables to show up decayed portions of flesh and the worms. Cold draughts come from the freezing room and hands got very cold from handling the icy fish. The only way to warm them was by soaking them in the tray of hot water on the table which was there for dipping the knives in so that the worms slipped off. Other hazards were cutting fingers on the knife (a beginner was always identifiable by the mass of plasters on the knife-free hand) and the danger of slipping on the wet, greasy floor. A flat-footed trot had to be learnt. People who have been in a fish-factory often assume that the smell is bad. Generally it is not, because the fish is fresh and kept on ice. I only recall one instance during a very hot spell, when we were working rather old fish, when the smell was bad enough to make me feel ill. Noise was more of a problem. In one factory the noise from the gutting machines was so loud that earmufflers had to be worn while the machine was running which increased the strain on the neck bent over the table. As one woman said to me "You really need someone at home to rub your back".

The major pressure on the women table workers is generated by the bonus system. Opinions were divided as to whether it was better to work in a factory which operated a bonus system or not. Some thought it meant the people were work-mad and unfriendly, while others said that the drive to work fast made the working hours pass more quickly.



Figure xii The Fish-factory: Freezing The Fish



Figure xiii The Fish-factory: Boxing The Fish

The bonus scheme was not of a simple type where a production target is set and payment made when this is reached. Under the system operating in Iceland the work rate was set after the work was done and it varied daily according to the quality of the fish. This was judged by carrying out a 'worm test' hourly when all the worms from one 20 kilo box of fish were saved by the women working the fish and counted by the leading hand. In the office the work rate was calculated from the average results of the worm tests throughout the day and the general condition of the fish - whole or broken up. It consisted of two figures for speed and percentage of usable fish. The amount of bonus a pair of women working at a table received depended on the extent to which they exceeded the minimum rate. As the rate depended on both speed and amount of fish saved, it was not possible just to work very fast but in a slapdash fashion, because this raised the wastage figure. The bonus system demanded speed, dexterity and accuracy. Although an experienced woman could broadly judge the quality of the fish, the actual rate set was not known until several days later when the bonus slips were handed out (see Figure xiv). Those very efficient workers who could achieve speeds of above twice the set rate did not receive a payment for this skill because bonus was only paid up to twice the set rate.

Figure xiv. Example of a bonus slip (translation)

					Bonus	
Date 30 MAY 1978 Table no. 003						
Fish	Packs in lbs	Number	Weight in kilos	Standard	Set time	
cod	5.0	37	83.92	16.08	3.45	
	18.5	3.00	25.17	17.21	0.51	
	18.5	2.16	18.13	25.00	0.54	
Weight used			127.2 kg	set time	5.31	
Weight given			140.0 kg	Time used	3.29	
Wastage			12.8 kg	Speed %	158	
Actual usage %			90.9	Usage figure	1.36	
Minimum set usage % 87.3						
					No of hours	Bonus/hr Total bonus
					3.29	638.7 2,223

The discipline required to make a good bonus under this scheme was very convenient for the management because the women exercised a high degree of self-control. They were there to clock in at the start of a shift, did not dawdle after coffee breaks, moved around the factory floor no more than was necessary to fetch more packaging materials and hot water for the worm tray, and only talked sporadically over the tables. As the women were assessed in pairs there was the added constraint of working well so as not to let the other woman down.

The women who worked regularly in the factory had settled partners with whom they had worked out a particular pattern of working. Some disliked packing and never did it while others insisted on doing all the packing. Other pairs did a lot of cutting together followed by a lot of packing. The shop floor manager did not attempt to arrange partnerships nor control the women's way of working. Only if one of the partners was absent would another woman be put to work on that table. A new worker would have to show that she was capable of pulling her weight and knew the tricks of the trade.

Useful techniques included choosing a short, thin curved knife, which were the fastest to work with and getting a box first thing in the morning which had as little water in it as possible. (The first boxes of fish worked in the morning stood overnight and water ran out of the fish which raised the wastage figure). It was also good practice to pack all the cut fish before the coffee break as again water ran out and the fish lost weight. Although there were no explicit discussions it quickly



became known how good a worker each woman was. It was most important that a woman was duglega, that is a diligent worker who regularly got a speed rating of 150-200. But a woman also had to be pleasant to work with and there was criticism of those who were identified as vitleysa í bónus, which can best be translated as bonus mad. These were the women who never talked except about some aspect of the work, and oversaw their partners' actions. Hence a woman had to be fast and accurate but also pleasant or she did not find a regular workmate and worked with a succession of partners or alone, when the factory was slack.

#### 4.4.2. Beating the Bonus System

In the section above some of the legitimate 'tricks of the trade' which are picked up with experience were mentioned. There were also a number of other practices, by no means legitimate, which were used by women in an attempt to increase their bonus figures. In one respect the management's and women's aims as regards the bonus system converged. The management wanted the fish processed quickly when it was in peak condition and with as little wastage as possible. The women also want to achieve fast speeds and low wastage because of the bonus system. As regards quality control their interests diverged. Ensuring that every bone and worm fragment was removed reduced speed. Careful packing: the 5 lb fillets with the plastic wrapped neatly around each piece of fish; the 18 lb boxes of gill and tail areas precisely laid out with the grain of the flesh running in one direction also took precious seconds. The management's concern was to have a high standard product in order to retain their overseas markets, especially the North American one.

The women had a number of strategies to outwit the quality control inspectors. These inspectors were supposed to check a couple of boxes from each completed tray of 15 x 5 lb fillets and take a sample from each tray of 3 x 18 lb tail and gill areas. The inspectors tended to get into a routine as to which boxes they took from the tray, such as upper left hand and middle right hand, so the women tried to ensure that those boxes were perfect: correct weight and no extraneous worms and bones. Instead of carefully arranging the fish in the 18 lb boxes, the pieces were just poured into the box and the top layer arranged to look straight. Women attempted to pace their work so that a new tray was started and placed on top of a completed one so that no boxes could be extracted from the underneath one for inspection. Even better, they tried to ensure that a tray was collected and taken to be frozen before the inspectors got to it. If anything was found to be wrong with a box of fish, a couple of worms or bones, the women had to re-check a number of others, which was of course a penalty because it slowed down the work rate.

The general air of racing time engendered by the bonus system and the war of nerves with the inspectors often resulted in raised tempers and disputes breaking out. If fish was not arriving fast enough at the tables the shop floor ran to the sound of the women banging the hot water trays with the backs of their knives. If the young women were slow at providing packing materials they were yelled at to hurry them up. The 'Australians' frequently voiced the opinion that they were discriminated against; that they had their boxes checked more frequently, were given more to re-check as a penalty and that they were the first to be

given cellophane to wrap the fillets which was more awkward to use than the usual plastic. It was hard to substantiate such a claim, but it did seem that the inspectors did check women whom they thought to be less conscientious and hence it was easy for a woman to feel that she was being 'picked on'. Once a woman's reputation was established as either bad or good she was checked more or less frequently and by the law of averages was more or less likely to be given boxes to re-check.

There were frequent complaints from all the women that the knives were not sharpened often enough. Having a well sharpened knife was vital, both because it allowed faster work and because a blunt knife increased the risk of accidents by dragging through the fish and jumping. In the first factory in which I worked the knives were sharpened on a steel hourly and ground on a wheel each night. In Fróneyri, however, the sharpening was haphazard, with a number of men doing it now and again. This annoyed the women, not just because the knives were often blunt, but also because having a number of different people doing it, some more skilful than others, spoilt the blade. Indeed one man did it so badly that the women tried to avoid having him sharpen their knives. If the shop floor manager had not detailed someone to sharpen the knives the women's only resort was to call over a man as he walked through the shop floor, chat him up, and ask him to do the sharpening. Getting a man to do this favour depended on being able to speak Icelandic and having a friendly relationship with the man concerned. It left the 'Australians' and workers from other parts of Iceland at something of a disadvantage which added to their feeling that the village women were favoured. Most women were



perfectly capable of using a steel and sharpening their own knife. The point is that they did not want to waste the time. It is perhaps the best indication of the absolute frenzy of bonus table work that women always had two knives so that they could carry on working for the 30 seconds it took to sharpen a knife.

The most acrimonious disputes concerned re-checking boxes if they were found to be underweight. This was partly because it took longer to re-weigh and re-pack the boxes than do a rapid re-check for stray worms and bones. In addition the women felt that it was the fault of the scales rather than their own negligence, which accounted for underweight boxes. Over the years the inner mechanism of the scales rusted in the damp atmosphere and they got out of true during the day as water and fish accumulated on them. Getting caught for worms and bones was 'part of the game' but it was the scales which caused underweight boxes and the women resented being pulled up for that. On more than one occasion shouting matches developed concerning the scales and I saw younger women reduced to tears after a lengthy argument with the inspector and shop floor manager.

A way of subverting the bonus system was to add a few extra worms to those being collected during a worm test. I only saw this being done once or twice and the women involved had a demeanour of suppressed hilarity which I attributed to nervousness and the fact that they were involved in an 'illegitimate' conspiracy. The bonus scheme demanded that the women develop a whole range of practices, legitimate skills and tricks of the trade, plus a good work reputation and friendliness with the male workers especially the inspector.

The occasion when the women and the inspectors collaborated was when a national inspector came to the factory. The women were told when an inspector arrived so that they could improve their standards in general and the factory inspector would be given a couple of boxes to inspect which had been given special attention by the women.

The air of frenetic activity in this part of the factory operation is captured in the following excerpts from a newspaper article Bónusheilræði (Bonus Wisdom) (þjóðviljinn: 10.5.80), by a woman fish-factory worker. Bryndís Þórhallsdóttir used exaggerated irony to convey the atmosphere in the factory in which she worked.

"When the clock strikes eight you must jump to your feet and rush to the factory floor in the shortest possible time. Try not to tread too many others underfoot - that's a little difficult to explain away. If you reach the shop floor unscathed rush to the knife table and choose a knife: if you are clever and wave your knife threateningly around, you will have a clear path to the aprons. Make sure that you put on your apron while going to your table. You can't be seen to stand like a fool in the middle of the floor and put your apron on in a leisurely fashion. You could lose all of 5 kronur bonus with such stupidity.

Well, now you have arrived at your table a very important consideration arises. This is to choose the right box of fish. If there are no good boxes nearby you must creep along the conveyor belt until you find one. I must warn you that on this journey you will be sent many black looks from hatefilled eyes. But they don't kill anyone - well I'm still hale and hearty.... Now my good woman if you happen to cut yourself don't let it worry you if it is only a small cut. Americans like tomato sauce with their fish. But - if you cut yourself so badly that your finger is hanging by a thread, your head is swimming and you are bleeding badly you must leave the table because don't believe for a minute that your workmates will tear themselves away from their bonus work to pick you up from the floor if you faint."

(translated freely in order to convey the tone of the original)

The multiple pressures portrayed above did not impinge on the non-table workers, the majority of whom were men. The rhythm and speed of their work was governed by the machines; fitting new sacks onto the fishmeal machine, feeding fish into the gutting machines, slotting trays of fish into the freezer and removing it when ready. This work had its own monotony and hazards, such as the noise of the machines, dust in the fishmeal room and cold in the freezing area, but it did not demand the concentrated minute-by-minute effort of the table workers. The non-table workers did not stand all day trying to make the most economical movements possible to push up their work rate. Nor did they experience the tiring contest with the inspectors and the emotional upsets when disputes broke out. During most days the men and younger women who did the various fetching and carrying jobs, could take short breaks, relax, move around, talk and have a smoke because enough fish was gutted or the freezer was full. The only days this did not occur was when all the tables were full and the women were working very high quality fish so that the machines had to be running continuously. However, on such days the men's actual rate of work was not increased because this was set by the machines: they worked more continuously but not faster. The only chance of a break the women got was when the gutting machines broke down or when the machines could not work fast enough to supply all the tables. Then all work was stopped.

The women's work rate was determined only by their own capabilities since it was their bodies not machines which did the work. The men did have to adapt themselves to the machines they operated, but their individual performance was not scrutinised as the women's was. The bonus payment they

received, called the premium, was calculated by reference to the total tonnage of fish worked in the factory during a week. Their payment was based on the collective effort of the whole factory which in fact was determined by the number and speed of women table workers.

The individual scrutiny and assessment was a discipline which the women internalised and made a self-discipline. Foucault described the beginnings of such individual assessment in 18th century factories.

"By walking up and down the central aisle of the workshop, it was possible to carry out a supervision that was both general and individual: to observe the worker's presence and application, and the quality of his work; to compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed; to follow the successive stages of the productive process. All these serialisations formed a permanent grid: confusion was eliminated: that is to say, production was divided up and the labour process was articulated, on the one hand, according to its stages or elementary operations, and, on the other hand, according to the individuals, the particular bodies, that carried it out: each variable of this force - strength, promptness, skill, constancy - would be observed, and therefore characterised, assessed, computed and related to the individual who was its particular agent".

(1979:145)

The result of such scrutiny and the discipline of the individual was to produce a trained "docile" body and, according to Foucault, an obedient workforce, which accepted the demands the work process made upon them.

"Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body: on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course

of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination."

(ibid:138)

In this case the system's coercive effect was masked by it being presented as a reward system rather than a punitive one. When disputes did erupt they were between individual women and the male inspector and shop floor manager. The higher level management were insulated from the problems of working on the shop floor and no criticism of the bonus system as a whole was developed.

#### 4.5. Emic Explanations of the Division of Labour

The reference to capacities and aptitudes in the quotation from Foucault is highly relevant because in Fróneyri recourse was made to supposed physiological and psychological characteristics to justify the gender-related division of labour in the factory and society as a whole. When asked about this, people replied that it was so - "that's the way it is". However, on being asked further, reference was often made to the notion that women were better at doing repetitive fiddly tasks and sometimes this was augmented with the argument that greater (male) physical strength was needed for other aspects of the work process. The second rationale was that women could choose their working pattern, full, part-time or seasonal, and this enabled them to carry out their duties as regards home and children. This was presented as a positive thing for women,

it gave them choice and flexibility. Such reasoning is found in societies other than Iceland and I wish to examine it in detail. I would suggest that such arguments are in fact a charter, which through the selective use of historical and contemporary evidence, create their own 'truth' and thereby ensure that the gender-related division of labour is seen as natural: the self-evident way of doing things.

The assertion that superior male strength is a determining factor in the division of labour appears weak when viewed in the light of historical and contemporary evidence. The preceding chapters documented the work done in the pre-industrial era by women which demanded strength and endurance. On the whole, women themselves did not accept that they belonged to the weaker sex and could point to their own working lives as proof. I was once party to a discussion which developed into a fierce argument on this topic. Today, in the factory it was the young women who spent all day carrying 20 kilo boxes of fish, and if no men were free, collected the trays of packed fish which weighed 75 kilos or more, working in pairs as the men did. During the summer of 1978 some young women worked loading 50 kilo sacks of fishmeal and dried fish onto a cargo boat in Fróneyri.

A second important point is that the distinguishing feature of many of the jobs held by men in the factory was that they required education and training not physical strength. Those jobs which did need physical effort such as unloading the boats, processing the fishmeal and moving fish around the factory, were aided by machines, cranes, forklift trucks and trolleys, as far as was possible.

When discussing the gender-related division of labour in farm work with one woman, she pointed out that superior male strength did not explain the allocation of work during haymaking. The division was not rigid but the tendency was for men to operate the mowing machines while women and children did the manual work of raking the hay to dry it. The basis of this division is that men did (and still do where the ground is too uneven to use machines) what is considered the skilled job of scything the grass. In her estimation it was the identification of men and machines that reinforced this division of labour today, leaving to women the 'unskilled' turning (snúa) of the hay. As I did not do men's work in the fish-factory my comments on their jobs are perforce based on observation not direct experience. It does seem valid, however, to say that for those men who used machinery, they worked with machines as controllers or manipulators. In contrast, the women table workers had to control their bodies as if they were machines in order to achieve the level of performance which was 'rewarded' by the bonus system.

The second aspect of the biological predisposition argument was that women were better than men at repetitive work and thereby suited to table work - making sure the fish was boneless and skinless as was proclaimed on the boxes. Again recent history shows that men were perfectly capable of standing all day at a table working because before the introduction of machines all fish was gutted by hand (handflakka). The villagers recalled that the men were brjálaðir, that is, they were crazy working all day without even taking a coffee break. It was while I was discussing this with a man that an internal contradiction was revealed

in the 'fitness for boring work' argument. We were again talking about strength and I attempted to argue that it depends on the definition of strength and that table work, standing all day etc. could be defined as strength. The counter-argument was that men could do this as well because they once did hand gutting all day. This view, however, demolishes the idea that women have an exclusive capacity for repetitive work. Asked why it was that men worked like mad when hand gutting it was said that their wages were calculated on a bonus scheme based on how much fish they gutted. I would argue that it was precisely the demands of the bonus system that ensured the quality and speed of the women's work rather than physiological and psychological disposition. As Foucault pointed out the discipline demanded by such an inspection system results in skills being developed which are then considered to be innate capacities of the workers. This example suggests that if the workers are women it is more likely that an 'innate capacity' rationale will be utilised. In the case of men another type of reason may be given, as here where economic necessity was cited.

The second major justification of the gender division of labour was that it suited women because they could pick and choose their work hours. Such reasoning glosses over the reality of women's position in the national labour force, as well as the arrangements an individual woman makes to adjust her routine to the demands of her particular job.

The facile view that the work suits women masked the everyday reality of women's lives. Work in the factory started at 8 am and finished at 7 pm. The school hours were 9 am to 12 pm with an odd afternoon for physical



education and crafts. So provision had to be made for the care of pre-school and school age children. As there was no crèche in the village individual arrangements had to be made for pre-school children.

At any time, usually at the end of work the previous day, the work's manager could decide to start work at 7 am or work on Saturday and Sunday. There were a minimum of labour laws and trade union agreements in Iceland. The "eight day rule" enforced a rest day after seven working days and the bonus scheme was not allowed to operate after 8 pm. In a village like Fróneyri, which got its fish supplies from a trawler, the flow of work was fairly regular. In villages which were only supplied by small boats, which could not go out in rough weather, the catch was sporadic. A glut and a week of working 16 hours per day could be followed by a week of no work. Even in Fróneyri we were called upon to work outside normal hours on many occasions. The incentive to do so was in part financial as evening and weekend/holiday work was paid at a higher basic rate. However, the 'coercive' effect of a request to work in a place like Fróneyri should not be overlooked (see section 4.6.4.).

The 'choices' women made concerning their degree of participation in the waged labour force were constrained by the demands of their dual role. The factory, in essence, made no concessions to them. They managed their lives to suit the rhythm of work in the factory, rather than it providing conditions convenient to them.

The concept of a choice for women masks the reality of industrial society; that through their unpaid domestic labour women maintain the labour force and occupy a particular

position in the paid labour force itself. As their participation in waged labour is often part-time, or uneven through the life cycle, its vital contribution to either the individual domestic, or collective national, economy is overlooked or under-estimated unless there is no male breadwinner or women demonstrate their role by strike action. The centrality of women's paid labour was demonstrated (and their potential for collective action graphically illustrated) by the women of Akranes (a town near Reykjavík) in 1975. Women who worked in the fish-factory struck for a guaranteed weekly wage. After three weeks the town council requested them to return to work because the town was on the edge of bankruptcy. (Þjóðviljinn, 9.2.80).

#### 4.6. Dual Labour Market Theory

A theoretical approach which attempts to explain the characteristics of women's role in the labour force is the dual labour market theory as presented by Barron and Norris. They suggested that a nation's labour force or the workers in a single industry or firm can be divided into two sectors which display important differences.

"A dual labour market is one in which:

1. There is a more or less pronounced division into higher paying and lower paying sectors;
2. Mobility across the boundary of these sectors is restricted;
3. Higher paying jobs are tied into promotional or career ladders, while lower paid jobs offer few opportunities for vertical movement;
4. Higher paying jobs are relatively stable, while lower paid jobs are unstable."

(1976:49)

Such a situation is advantageous for employers in two respects. First it ensures that the skilled workers are offered higher wages and fringe benefits which mean they stay in their jobs and reduces the manpower costs to the industry. Second the solidarity of the workforce is reduced as those in the skilled areas are less likely to support strike action by the lower paid. The effect is to create a group of key workers whose stability is ensured by the better wages and career prospects they are given and a more malleable group of secondary workers. Such an arrangement is particularly advantageous in industries which experience fluctuations in supply and demand, where the total size of the labour force can be varied in tune with these variations. Such fluctuations do occur in the fishing industry, especially as regards supply, because the vagaries of the weather, periodic conservation measures such as week long 'cod bans' and the seasonal nature of fishing itself with the heaviest period being the winter, all mean that there are times of little or no work in the fish-factories. As most of the fish is deep frozen today and can be stored for many months, slackening of demand in the overseas export markets has less immediate effect on the work in the processing plants. However, national and international economic factors can affect this industry as was shown in the summer of 1978 when a number of factories in the south of Iceland simply shut for a period. These factories ran at a loss but because they exported most of their produce and got foreign currency the government subsidised them. During that summer the State was late in negotiating and paying the subsidy. There was no money to pay wages and the factories simply shut.

Consideration of the Icelandic fishing industry as a whole suggests that a division into primary and secondary sectors can be identified. The primary sector is formed by some of the fishermen, fishery research staff, management and marketing staff and members of the national inspectorate who have guaranteed wages (plus the possibility of very high rewards dependent on the size of the catch for the fishermen) training opportunities and a promotional ladder. The majority of the land-based fish processing workers form a secondary sector characterised by lower pay, unskilled manual work and no promotional prospects. However, there are sub-divisions. In the fish-factories themselves, the managers, accountants, works managers, electricians and carpenters form a primary sector. This sector division is also a gender division as the jobs mentioned above in the primary sector are almost exclusively held by men while women, augmented by a few young and old men, form the secondary sector. Ordinary deckhands, going from ship to ship, formed a sub-sector among fishermen.

The internal Iceland explanation of why there should be such a gender division of labour has been presented above. Such a process of identifying the attributes of the job with the job holders is common in industrial society, being expressed by both employers, employees and researchers (Barron and Norris, *ibid*:50). However, the authors suggest that such an approach distorts the underlying reality which is formed both by the demands of the social structure as a whole and the particular interests of the industrial market.

"There seem to be five main attributes that may make a particular social group or category a likely source of secondary workers: dispensability, clearly visible social difference, little interest in acquiring training, low economism and lack of solidarity. These attributes are the product of the social relationship between employer and worker, and not something which an individual possesses independently of that relationship. At the same time, they are qualities which are to some extent shaped elsewhere in the social structure and brought to the employment market. Thus they are not characteristics which an individual possesses solely by virtue of his market situation, but they help to determine an individual's market situation in conjunction with the interests and requirements of employers."

(ibid:53)

If each of the five characteristics are examined in the Icelandic context they appear to be relevant factors when explaining women's confinement to the secondary sector in the fishing industry.

#### 4.6.1. Dispensibility

This refers to both voluntary and involuntary redundancy but Iceland at the time of my fieldwork had no unemployment and indeed experienced a need for extra workers at certain seasons, so permanent dismissal was not significant. The important thing for the fishing industry was the overall malleability of the work force: laid off for short periods, called into work at weekends or at night. The reason that women formed such a malleable work force was the demands placed upon them by housekeeping and childraising. These duties ensured that their work experience was broken up during their life-cycle and during the year when they gave up waged work because of school holidays. The fact that

women were, on the whole, not the main breadwinners of a family nor expected to be, also contributed to their acquiescence in the employer's manipulations since they did not experience a total loss of household income when laid off. These factors, brought from outside the factory, were re-enforced by the nature of the work the women did. It was very routine, quite arduous and something of a psychological strain because of the bonus system. It offered no real variation, training or promotion prospects so there was no advantage for a woman in working regularly full-time year in year out because this would never lead to an enhanced career.

These considerations meant that women had low expectations of their work: as one woman said to me "Yes it is boring but it is a job" and showed little or no organised opposition to the demands it made upon them. There was some individual resistance in Fróneyri to working at nights and weekends in that women who did not wish to do so, or could not, because of prior family demands did not turn up for work at these times. However, the men who unloaded the trawler actually negotiated with the factory owner that the boat should not dock at weekends if at all possible so they would not be called out to off-load the fish during the two rest days. The overall effect was that women 'voluntarily' moved in and out of the labour force and showed only a minimal resistance to the demands the fish-factory made upon their time. The men who also had unskilled jobs in the factory, the young and the old, showed a rather different movement as they moved to another type of wage work or form of money making. The old men spent the summer months with their sheep and making hay

which made them some money, while the young men took any opportunity to get better paid work on the small fishing boats and trawlers.

#### 4.6.2. Social Difference

Ensuring that the sector division of employment in an industry is congruent with a social division widely accepted in society enhances the likelihood that the industrial division of labour will be non-controversial. Gender is one of the most important culturally held criteria of social difference. As described, in Iceland there were ideas concerning what were believed to be the differing biological aptitudes and capabilities of women and men. Although there was a certain amount of debate about the precise nature of the biological differences, ideas of women's physical fitness for certain jobs still did operate. Whenever I asked women if they had ever been to sea or considered such work the response was very often that they had not because they got seasick. Fishermen on the other hand told me that everyone got seasick when they went to sea: it was expected. They did not view it as sufficient reason to prevent a career at sea. Further discussion also emphasised the virtual impossibility, for a woman, of combining looking after a family and going to sea. But the mention of the seasickness problem suggests that they also had implicit notions of their physical limitations which contributed to their ruling out certain employment areas.

Having a gender division of labour not only brings into action beliefs about the fitness of people for the

jobs they do but also the ideas of their social responsibilities. In Fróneyri women's primary responsibility was to their family and home. This meant they made all the accommodations familiar in western industrial society; doing part-time work, following their husbands if their career meant moving, taking time off if children were sick and so on.

#### 4.6.3. Acquiring Training

Factors which operate prior to and outside the labour market are also important in determining women's attitudes to training and rate of pay. Women are brought up to believe that certain employment areas are male preserves and so are less likely to opt for these and get the training necessary for a skilled job. This was reinforced by the expectation that marriage and/or children would limit participation in the labour force and thus the expense of obtaining an education might not be justified. The cost of further and higher education was an important factor in Iceland because maintenance costs for schooling after the age of 16 had to be paid for. A general further education was provided, outside Reykjavík, at the residential high schools and vocational training was offered at the various colleges for seamen, students of commercial studies etc. There were few grants available to study at the Icelandic University and other colleges, so students had to finance themselves by working during the vacations and by taking government loans. The level of cost was considerable; one young man studying at a vocational college in the south needed £5,000 to pay for his living expenses (1977-8).



Another relevant factor was the limited possibility of skilled employment if skills were obtained. The whole Vestfirðir region offered only limited possibilities in the fishing, education and commercial sectors and the village of Fróneyri itself obviously had a very narrow range of opportunities. Hence acquisition of training, except in the fishing industry, almost inevitably meant migration to get a suitable job. Women who did have a skill but resided in Fróneyri, because they followed their partners or because of other family commitments, could not practice that skill because there was no work available. Examples of this were the two women who were qualified as children's nurses and another who had studied graphic art.

Even a woman who overcomes the institutionalised barriers to taking up the fishing life may find her employment prospects limited because of her social situation. Women have begun to qualify as sea captains and engineers in the last few years. One of the first to qualify told me that she could not go to sea because she had a young child to care for and it was impossible to commit herself to lengthy trips. So she worked in a fish-factory. A seaman on the other hand could rely on his wife to maintain the family while he was away.

#### 4.6.4. Low Economism

The concept that secondary sector workers show low economism, that is are less likely to display militancy over pay should not be taken to mean that women do work just for 'pin money' (although the idea that they only work for extras may have a powerful ideological force). Iceland has a high

standard of living but also when I was there a very high rate of inflation and two incomes are usually necessary to maintain that standard of living. However, as stated before, a woman's income is usually not considered the main one. This, plus their periodic experience of receiving no income appears to predispose women to accept the wages and conditions offered by the factory rather than challenge it. They were described as receiving "equal pay" and indeed their pay was equal to, or even more, than the unskilled men in the factory but it was far below that received by men in other areas of the fishing industry.

#### 4.6.5. Lack of Solidarity

The final characteristic of secondary sector workers is their lack of solidarity and unwillingness to take part in industrial action. The factor which militated against collective action in the village as a whole was the personal relationship between the owner of the factory and the workers. He was a local man, resident in the village, related by kinship to some. He was perceived by many as a friend and to some extent a saviour since he had rescued the factory in the 1950s after it ran into economic trouble when in collective ownership. There was a tendency to see the work in the factory as "working for Jón" (the owner) and not for an employer. One woman said when called into work at the weekend, "I felt I had to come because there is so much fish and Jón was so worried about it decaying". This sort of attitude was reinforced by the fact that Fróneyri was, a one-industry village and so action against the factory could be seen as threatening everyone's livelihood; even the

continued existence of the village. Not everyone agreed with the view of the factory as a bountiful workplace.

"Frystihúsið kúgu folkið" (the fish-factory oppresses people) was an attitude taken by some, generally younger, people. This difference in attitude between the young and older people stemmed from the latter's experience of great poverty in their youth. They tended to be happy with the improvement of working conditions and rise in standards of living and less critical of current conditions.

The following factors refer to the women in particular. The union was industry based, had a regional structure and all the representatives from Fróneyri were men. As was shown by the experience of the Akranes strike in 1975, there was little reason to expect that such a male dominated union would either take up issues that affected women or support militant action by the women. In Akranes the women were not supported by the union or Icelandic T.U.C.

The presence of foreign workers did reduce the women's bargaining power, in the view of some village women. The Australian and New Zealand women were recruited in London while travelling around the world. They came on six to nine month contracts, had their return flights paid for and were given free accommodation in the fish-factory house. They came to Iceland to make as much money as possible in a short time and therefore worked full-time and took all the overtime available. They could not in fact have been used to break a strike if one occurred, because they would not have been able to work if the Icelanders all struck. However, their presence meant, in the view of some village women, that the factory owner did not have to take action

to improve facilities to enable more Icelandic women to take up work in the factory or work full-time. Several of the women with young or school age children said they would have worked full-time if there were transport to the factory in the winter and a crèche available. However, their chances of obtaining such facilities seemed remote as long as the employer had the fund of 'Australians' to draw upon.

Providing the facilities the village women wanted, involving long-term capital investment, would probably not have resulted in there being sufficient full-time Icelandic workers to replace the 'Australians', either through encouraging village women to take jobs or attracting new people to the village. The foreign women were a secondary sector par excellence. Totally manipulable, willing to work as much as possible, non-unionised, cut off from issues by lack of language, largely accepting of their work and living conditions because it was temporary.

#### 4.7. Wage Rates and the Definition of Skill

In their article, Phillips and Taylor criticised the approach the dual labour market theory exemplifies, of analysing women's position in the workforce as being entirely explicable in terms of the logic of the capitalist system.

"... since work - whether waged or unwaged - has always been divided along sexual lines, surely we cannot hope to explain the sex-segregation of capitalist waged work solely in terms of the profit imperatives of capitalism itself?"

(1980:80)

They argued that the classification of work as skilled or unskilled (and the commensurate differential wage rates)

is not based upon objective criteria but is largely determined by the gender of those doing the work.

"It is not that skill categories have been totally subjectified: in all cases some basis was found in the content of the work to justify the distinction between men and women's work. But the equations - men/skilled, women/unskilled - are so powerful that the identification of a particular job with women, ensured that the skill content of the work would be downgraded. It is the sex of those who do the work, rather than its content, which leads to its identification as skilled or unskilled."

(ibid:85)

The following extracts (page 189) from the wage rates for the Vestfirðir region set on 1.6.78 show the pay scales for some of the manual jobs in the factory.

As detailed at the beginning of the chapter men held the managerial positions in the factory as well as those jobs requiring craft skills such as carpenter, electrician and engineer, which had separate pay rates based upon qualifications and length of service. Unloading the fish was paid on a flat rate basis of 50,000 krónur (£77) regardless of the amount of fish and time it took to clear the trawler.

I often heard the statement that women fish-factory workers received equal pay. The question is equal with whom, since no man did the same job. The extract from the pay rates shows that they did not receive an equal basic pay rate with any man who worked a machine. The women were paid at the general manual rate which was the lowest basic rate in the factory. The only men on this rate were the young ones who did general fetching and carrying jobs. They took fish to the gutting machines, collected the trays of packed fish from the tables, loaded it into the freezer and put it in cartons once it was frozen. This, and the

Table 21. Wage Rates in the Vestfirðir Fishing Industry  
1.6.78.

		<u>Overtime</u>	<u>Nighttime</u>
<u>General Manual</u> (krónur/hour) (third band)		(Basic rate for women table workers, young women and men who did fetching and carrying in the factory)	
1st year	836	1,051	1,352
after 1st year	847	1,065	1,370
after 4 years	864	1,086	1,397
<u>Gutting Machine Operators</u> (krónur/hour)			
1st six months	848	1,051	1,352
2nd six months	852	1,071	1,377
after 1 year	906	1,152	1,481
after 2 years	920	1,175	1,510
after 3 years	934	1,197	1,539
after 5 years	948	1,219	1,568
after 6 years	962	1,242	1,597
<u>Quality Control Inspectors</u> (krónur/hour)			
starting pay	956	1,229	1,580
after three months	1,019	1,333	1,714
after 1 year	1,049	1,380	1,775
after 5 years	1,080	1,429	1,838
after 10 years	1,109	1,477	1,899
<u>Shift in the Fishmeal Works</u> (8 hours)			
		<u>After first year</u>	<u>After 4 years</u>
Workman	8,113 (1,014/hour)	8,240 (1,030/hour)	8,388 (1,048/hour)
Foreman	8,924 (1,115/hour)	9,064 (1,133/hour)	9,227 (1,153/hour)

Source: Kaupgjaldsskrá fyrir Vestfirði frá  
1. Júní 1978

fact that the manual rate had only two increments after one and four years compared to the greater number of increments for those working with machines suggests that table work was perceived as unskilled, with no account being taken of the women's dexterity and concentration in setting the basic hourly rates. On the other hand, driving a lorry or operating a gutting machine meant receiving an enhanced basic pay rate. It has already been stated that ability to do table work was seen as an innate feminine capacity. Working with a machine is recognised, as indicated by the pay scales, as an acquired skill.

#### Manual Work

##### Women's Work

##### Men's Work

Body used as a machine	:	Body used with machines
Skills seen as 'innate capacity'	:	Skills seen as acquired, enjoined by economic necessity
Lower basic pay	:	High basic pay
Individuated bonus system:	:	Collective premium system

In this sort of situation, where differential wages were paid, it was not 'objective' criteria which determined the pay rates but the ideological force of beliefs concerning gender differences and the tradition, which pre-dated Iceland's industrialisation of women's work being lower paid than men's (see section 2.7.).

In the fish-factory the situation was complicated by the bonus payment which could be seen as a reward for skill as it was directly related to the women's performance. However, there is a crucial distinction to be drawn between a higher basic wage rate which is given to a worker defined as skilled and an extra payment which may be obtained on top of a low basic rate by someone defined as unskilled. In fact being paid on some sort of bonus or piece-rate

basis is diagnostic of low paid 'unskilled' work. When people in Fróneyri said that women got equal pay they were referring to the fact that women received the same rate hour as the lowest paid men and could potentially earn more than these same men because their bonus per week was usually more than these men's premium payment. The extent of women's 'equal pay' was earning a little more than the lowest paid men.

People spoke of the best women receiving tvöfalt kaup (double pay) that is they matched their hourly pay with the bonus payment, but in reality they could not double their weekly basic pay. The first thing which prevented this was that not all types of fish were worked on the bonus scheme. In some factories just cod and haddock were so worked. Even in those places where all types of fish were processed with the scheme in operation it was difficult if not impossible to get a good bonus payment for working fish like ocean perch which are very small and pollock which are simple to fillet, resulting in a very fast set rate which was difficult to better. Second, the bonus payments were actually made only for the time the women were working fish, so if the gutting machine broke down, and there was a pause in production, the number of bonus hours was reduced. Lastly, there was the physical strain of keeping up a really fast rate when attempting to achieve 'double pay'. Only two young women in Fróneyri were acknowledged to be able to do this consistently and they worked the morning four hour shift. One of them said she could not have done it if she worked full-time because it would have been too tiring.

An analysis over seven months of the wages of one woman who worked a regular four hour shift shows that 27%, just



over one quarter of her total pay, was made up of bonus payments. The fastest full-time workers had a gross weekly wage of about 65,000 krónur (£100) of which approximately 20,000 krónur (£31) (30%) came from the bonus. One of the young men who received the same basic rate as the women, said he got an average 10,000 krónur/week (£15) from the premium system.

It should not be assumed that where there is a division of labour in a work process that the work done by different people is seen as complementary and of equal value even if explicit statements are made to that effect. Observation of the fish-factory suggests that there is indeed a hierarchy of values which was related to gender, since movement across the division was of women doing men's jobs but not vice versa. If there were insufficient men available in the factory, women worked on the gutting machines and carried fish to the freezing room, but a dearth of table workers never resulted in men doing that job, except in the circumstances, and with the results, described below.

If there were few women working in the factory and the fish was being processed slowly the young men on the basic wage rate would get a low premium payment as it was tied to the total amount of fish worked. On just two occasions during my fieldwork young men did table work in order to try and get more money. When a couple of Icelandic men did this they were teased by the other men and young women and responded by indulging in horseplay, throwing fish at each other and having waterfights with the hoses used to swab down the tables. They had no chance of working hard to achieve their object of increasing their pay, so they gave up table work the next day.

In the second incident a foreign man who tried table work was more ruthlessly sanctioned. After the morning coffee break he returned to the factory floor to find his apron missing. He spoke a little Icelandic and asked one of the Icelandic men what the word for apron was in order to ask the women whether they had seen it. What he hoped to say was "Have you seen my apron, I left it here before coffee and now I can't find it?" What he was actually told to say unwittingly to the women was "Have you seen my penis...etc." The women just collapsed in laughter and the man was totally shamed on being given an explanation and he did not do table work the next day, saying the work was "too boring". The implications of this incident, that a man loses his manhood on doing women's work, is a testament to the deeply held notions of gender differentiation and suggests that even if women's work is not explicitly evaluated as inferior, it is implicitly recognised as demeaning for a man to do it. The differences between women and men's work may be very small. It was, and still is, all right for men to do hand gutting which is fairly similar to table work.

There was no equivalent sanctioning of women who did men's jobs in the fish-factory. I did see that the woman qualified as a sea captain was regarded as 'rather strange' and her rolling walk was mimicked by young people in the fish-factory in which she worked. Both she and two other women I knew who went to sea, as a cook and line baiter, said they were accepted and respected for their work by the fishermen. It is not demeaning for a woman to cross the gender line and do men's work.

An interesting comparative case is that of cooks on the fishing boats. Cooking in the home is done by women in

Iceland; on boats it is largely a male occupation. They have a rather ambivalent position on board, as indicated by the joke: "The ship went down, all the crew were saved, the cook drowned", i.e. the cook is not a real member of the crew. I was told that cooks had to be rather special men. This was because problems on board tend to centre on the galley, the food and the cook. If there was dissent on the boat it tended to be expressed in the galley where the crew met. Mealtimes were very important as a break in the work; whether this was routine or arduous or dangerous and the food and cook were often the scapegoats when there were problems. The cook could not hide away like the captain on his bridge or the engineers in the engine room. I was told he had to be a calm sort of character, able to get on with people and smooth over dissent among the crew. Such attributes are often associated with women. So cooks do work which is associated with women and are ascribed 'feminine' character traits. They receive a rate of pay above the deckhand rate - because they practice acquired 'feminine' skills? As a woman asked, would cooks get the higher pay rate if this had traditionally been a woman's job on board ship? This question cannot be answered. All that can be stated is that cooks were paid above the basic rate, but as the joke implied there was some ambivalence about their status. This stemmed from the fact that they broke the boundaries of the gender-related division of labour: they were an anomalous category.

#### 4.8. Conclusions

In this chapter the factors which shape people's involvement in the paid labour force have been considered.

Some are familiar from other studies of industrial society: women are not expected to be the main family breadwinner; they are primarily responsible for childrearing and housework. It is the demands of their dual role which must be considered when seeking to analyse women's working role and thus the interconnections of private/public, home/waged work spheres cannot be ignored. In general men were expected to be the breadwinner in a family and were freed from day to day domestic responsibilities because of their wife's unpaid labour in the home. (As mentioned, married fishermen in particular tried to ameliorate the impact of their work on family life, but this did not result in their confinement to the lowest paid jobs. On the contrary, some were, to an extent, able to decide on the amount of time they spent at sea because they were highly paid). Other factors were more specific to Icelandic conditions: the seasonal cycle of the farming year and major fishing periods; virtual impossibility of commuting; narrow range of occupations, which as women were excluded from fishing, affected them more than men.

The arguments advanced in Fróneyri to explain the gender division of labour in the fish-factory and elsewhere are also found in other societies. Historical and contemporary evidence showed that these cannot be accepted as objective criteria but should be understood as elaborated justifications of the situation they are supposed to explain. Table work is low paid as much because it is defined as women's work as 'unskilled' work. Indeed, it seems to be classified as unskilled because it is women's work. It was implicitly seen as demeaning for a man to do. Women who do jobs

classified as men's work may encounter difficulties and opposition but not the ridicule a man encounters on doing women's work. This suggests that breaking down the gender related division of labour will be most difficult in two areas: getting men to take a full share in domestic work and to do waged work which is defined as women's work.

CHAPTER FIVE - CONTEMPORARY ICELAND: WORK IN THE HOME5.1. Introduction

Until the 1970s there were very few critical examinations of housework. The exceptions were the work of women such as de Beauvoir in France who described the unending repetition of housework in The Second Sex, first published in 1949, and Sigurðardóttir in Iceland who asked "Is the occupation of housewife despised?" in 1954. In the early 1960s Friedan analysed housework as part of her seminal critique of the position of American women (1965) and Mainardi (1970) used humour in her article to point out critical issues which arise when a woman attempts to involve her partner in housekeeping.

As the modern feminist movement gained momentum women began to talk and write about housework, but social scientists were largely silent on the subject. A situation which Oakley attributed to male orientation of Sociology in general and the particular view of housework as a topic inappropriate for sociological analysis:

"The conventional sociological approach to housework could be termed 'sexist': it has treated housework merely as an aspect of the feminine role in the family - as part of women's role in marriage, or as a dimension of child-rearing - not as a work-role"

(1974:2)

Other reasons for its neglect appears to have been identified by Davidoff, with her recognition that the use of the appellation housewife/housework is a last resort:

"In contemporary society both

tend to be residual categories used to fall back on when an activity or person cannot be classified in any other way."

(1976:121)

A residual category is hardly one to be valued or studied. Housewives are mentioned as important, particularly in their role as child-rearers, only by politicians and pundits anxious to uphold the 'integrity of the family', highlight the alleged dangers of maternal deprivation or chastise women for taking 'men's jobs' during time of economic recession.

The neglect of housework as a subject for analysis would also seem to stem from the very pervasiveness of women's involvement in it. Whether married or not, in paid work or not, the vast majority of women take part in housekeeping. Hunt's survey, conducted in 1968 showed that 85% of British women aged 16-64 were responsible for running a home (Oakley, op. cit.: 29). When such a situation obtains it is a short step to seeing housework as 'natural' for women, hence unproblematic and therefore unworthy as a subject for academic study<sup>1</sup>.

The feminist movement acted to change this and in 1980 Kaluzynska reported that there were over 50 articles about the subject published during the previous decade, in Britain and America alone. Kaluzynska's article was a review of those writings in which she traced the main themes to emerge. First, there were those works which began to explore housework, cataloguing the tasks involved,

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1. In the early marxist works a sexual division of labour was also seen as 'natural'. Engels, for instance considered that in the epoch of savagery it was "purely primitive" and resulted in no differential access to power, for "They are each master in their own sphere: the man in the forest, the woman in the house"(1972:218).

the attitudes and experiences of women and the degree of men's participation in the work. Such an approach is exemplified by Oakley (op.cit.) and Comer (1974). Second, there were the works which compared housework to wage work and charted changes over time. These were the basis of the discussion, both academic and polemical, of the relationship between unpaid domestic labour and waged work within the capitalist system, which was the third major theme.

Kaluzynska isolated three strands in this body of writing. 1) Firestone (1972) exemplified the radical feminist approach which saw women's confinement in the home as the current manifestation of the universal patriarchal domination of women. 2) The wages for housework approach began as a consciousness raising strategy and developed into the more controversial campaign for actual pay for housewives. 3) The last theme became known as the domestic labour debate, in which an attempt was made to develop an adequate analysis of housework within a marxist framework (Dalla Costa and James, 1973; Delphy, 1977; Harrison, 1973; Seccombe, 1974). As already mentioned (see section 3.1.) this debate became rather stultified, constrained by its narrow focus on housework alone.

In this chapter an analysis of the work done in contemporary Icelandic homes is given. After considering how the study of housework may be approached, various topics relevant to the work done in Icelandic homes are examined; the allocation of space and its use in the home, housework itself, shopping, and the provision of food.



## 5.2. Running a Home

All descriptions of housework and attempts to analyse it have to confront the difficulty of actually conveying the particular way it is done and the range of very varied activities that can be gathered under the generic term housekeeping. Some authors have settled for a few basic jobs, as Oakley did when choosing the six core tasks of cleaning, shopping, cooking, washing up, washing and ironing to determine housewives' 'league table' of most liked and disliked jobs (op.cit.:49). Young and Willmott listed washing up, help with children, cooking and cleaning to identify men's contribution to housework (1973:95). Those specific tasks obviously are a part of housekeeping but using such lists distances the description and analysis from the reality of the practice. Running a home is more than doing chores.

In this context it is noteworthy that the eighteenth century farm laws (see section 2.7.) which so carefully delineated the work of servants, did not specify the amount of washing, cleaning and cooking to be carried out. Such work was covered by words such as "inside work" or "service". The necessary work had to be done, in the time it took to do it.

Any attempts by an observer to describe housekeeping is an attempt to describe practice. Bourdieu (1977) criticised approaches which over-formalise and thus deny the reality, the rhythm, of what they try to analyse. social scientists, predisposed to classify and establish models and rules, tend to be unable to convey the

"necessary improvisation" and "tempo" (ibid.:8) which is at the heart of practice.

"To restore to practice its practical truths we must therefore re-introduce time into the theoretical representation of a practice which, being temporally structured, is intrinsically defined by its tempo"

(ibid:8)

As an example of an over-mechanistic approach Bourdieu mentioned housework and the reductionism of Harris. He (Harris) observed "480 behavior stream events" by his wife during 20 minutes in the kitchen (ibid:73, 214-5). A housewife is involved in orchestrating and responding to events which makes it extraordinarily difficult to describe or generalise about housework. To use Bourdieu's terminology again, a housewife is undoubtedly a practical master but the language of symbolic mastery is crucially limited.

This is manifest in a number of ways. First, running a home can only to a limited extent be taught. It is largely learnt by following example and by doing it: something which was expressed by the woman who told me

"You'll know what it is like when you marry, always thinking of the next meal and how to get through the day's work".

Second, the language used of housekeeping activities, particularly when it refers to the maintenance of order is quite unspecific: cleaning and tidying up, putting things to rights. A housewife knows what she means by tidying up a room (taka til í herbergi). It means dusting, Hoovering, picking up toys, piles of newspapers, plumping cushions, straightening lampshades, seeing the curtains

are hanging properly and ensuring that the room feels right. This is as much the creation of an environment, an aesthetic atmosphere, as a functional or hygienic activity, but the language hardly expresses this.

Bourdieu identified time and more particularly tempo as important factors in practice. As Gardiner (1976:119) noted waged work is rule bound in terms of time but a housewife appears to dispose of her own time. It is clear that housewives do not control their own time. There are multiple external constraints; meals have to be provided at times dictated by waged work and school schedules, shopping done during opening hours, washing dried when the weather allows (particularly in Iceland) and children, if at home, responded to. If a woman in the fish-factory was racing time because of the bonus system, a housewife was juggling with time. As Oakley expressed it:

"The housewife is 'free from' but not 'free to'. That is, she is exempt from supervision but not wholly free to choose her own activities."

(op.cit.:44)

There may be certain fixed points in a housewife's day, week and year but to suggest that there is an explicit, rigid routine which is adhered to, which can be identified by an observer, is to deny the essentially extemporaneous nature of running a home. Planning does go into housekeeping, but as regards her time a housewife can never rely on a fixed schedule involving a succession of discrete jobs. The tempo of her work is governed by the stream of external events and the necessity of doing and thinking about more than one thing at a time.

That housekeeping is not amenable to rigid classifica-

tion in terms of the tasks or time it takes, explains in part the resistance to paying wages to housewives. The practical difficulties of assessing and rewarding the work are cited as an insuperable problem. Clearly, the past employment of domestic servants and the contemporary role of the paid housekeeper show that it is not impossible to delineate and pay for housework. However, the role of housewife involves the emotional relationships with husband and children, not just the housework activities. To pay housewives would bring explicit commercial overtones to a situation which is conceived of in non-commercial terms. It would bring the market place into the family home, which is thought of today as a refuge from the outside world.

Comer wrote:

"To pay housewives, paradoxically enough, cheapens their work. When it is reduced to an economic transaction with all that that implies - definition of work, hours, terms of contract and so on - it brings the hard outside world into the home... To introduce payment for the woman's work is to taint love with cash."

(op.cit.:120)

Writing of a very different phenomenon, cargo cults, Burridge examined the complex results of introducing money into a situation where it was absent,

"Money points out the difference between qualitative and quantitative measures of man in relation to his moral stature.....manipulated every day, permanently in the forefront of awareness, money is a concrete representation of the one-and-the-many. It creates relationships, may vitiate, break, ennoble or enforce them. Money lends itself to non-reciprocal action....Money as an abstract, factorial and quantitative system must be opposed to the qualities that measure the stature of man. Yet it also evokes the individual in whom, ultimately, the highest qualities of being human are reckoned"

(1980:146,148,149)

The introduction of money would seem to have contradictory or perhaps paradoxical effects. As regards housework it is the distinction between quality and quantity which is important. What a housewife does, concerns ordering a physical and emotional environment. It is inimical in western society that these relationships should be routinely evaluated in explicit, monetary terms. The work of housework has its own qualitative dimensions because it is not just a case of doing the cooking, cleaning and so on, but how and to what standard it is done. The emotional relationships are expressed in the care, the quality of the work. A cataloguing of jobs is one starting point for an analysis of housework. A more fruitful approach is to view it as the creation and maintenance of a home: the physical environment and the people within it (Davidoff, op.cit.:124). This distinction is epitomised in the germanic languages by the differentiation of the words for house and home (Rabuzzi, 1982:44). In Icelandic these are hús and heim. This chapter considers housework as a part of the analysis of the process of creating and running a home.

### 5.3. The Home - A Woman's Place?

Through the historical process described in chapter three the Icelandic home has become a space lived in by the family only and has lost most, if not quite all its productive functions. There has been a growing separation of home and place of work; the home is no longer the place where the majority of the members of a family work. This separation is apparent both spatially and temporally; child-

ren are educated away at school and waged labour takes place in distant offices and factories. The home is seen as a place where work does not take place: indeed, the home becomes a refuge from work where there is shelter from the stresses of the outside world. For a woman the home is no sort of refuge because although she might work outside the home, she returns to her other workplace.

Davidoff (op.cit.:125) suggested that in doing housework women are protecting society against symbolic and physical disorder and are therefore ambiguous. She followed Douglas in seeing such marginalised members of society as potentially threatening and hence their sphere of action is limited. In Iceland, women are by no means confined to the home but their access to other areas of society, as shown in chapter four, is structured by their role as housekeepers and child-raisers. In this sense the home is a woman's place. The irony is that although the home may be her place, there is rarely, in a modern home, a place for a woman. This section demonstrates that the way in which the space in a home is used, means that a woman can only create a place for herself within it if this is legitimated by some activity.

The privacy of the home and the social and physical isolation of housewives in industrialised society is often stressed<sup>2</sup>. In Iceland although most women had a paid job and so were outside the home for at least part of the day, when they were working at home they were isolated from adult company. However, it is as important to recognise

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2. It is not only in western industrial society that the home is a woman's place and their work is invisible. In describing the Berber house, Bourdieu wrote "In opposition to man's work which is performed outside, it is the nature of woman's work to remain hidden ('God conceals it'):....." (1973:103-4)

that a home is not a totally private space and while it is the woman's responsibility, it is used by the rest of the family. A home is a workplace in terms of housekeeping and childraising, a place of relaxation away from waged work and school and a social space for entertaining visitors.

The modern Icelandic home, whether a new concrete detached house, a flat, or modernised timber house is centrally heated, has a bathroom, kitchen with an array of electrical equipment, smartly furnished sitting room and a cellar for storage and the deepfreeze<sup>3</sup>. The spatial divisions of the home - the rooms, are named, on the whole, in recognition of their primary function. They can also be understood in terms of how they are actually used by members of the family and the access non-family members have to them, which together affect the amount of work engendered by the home.

The bathroom/lavatory (baðherbergi) is the room where the individual members of the family can ensure that they are alone. It is the one room from which others may be locked out (Comer, op.cit.:108) - not only, I would suggest because there is a bolt on the door. In Iceland washing, batheing etc. are not communal activities therefore privacy can be sought in the bathroom because it is purposeful solitude. Notions of hygiene, coupled with the fact that visitors use the bathroom on occasion, mean that it is a room which is kept well ordered - clean and tidy.

Unlike other rooms in the house bedrooms (svefnherbergi) are allocated to particular members of the family. They are rarely wholly individual spaces because they tend to

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3. Many of the blocks of flats in towns had basement rooms with storage and laundry space.

be shared with a spouse or sibling. Adults do not in general use a bedroom during the day. To go there signals illness or something else wrong unless it is legitimated by some activity such as doing the ironing or sorting through clothing for washing or repair. Adults' bedrooms therefore tend to be the least used rooms in the house. In contrast, children and adolescents make great use of their bedrooms, alone or with their friends. As the room is 'theirs' they can find privacy away from adults there but there is a degree of ambiguity over who controls this space. It is the child's room but also part of the home for which the housewife has overall responsibility. The disputes which do occur are over whose concept of order should prevail: the housewife's or the child's.

The stofa in most Icelandic homes is a sitting rather than a living room. The Icelandic term means just 'room'; it does not have a functional label, which underlines that this is a place to be in, rather than to do in. It is the room with the comfortable chairs, television, bookshelves, paintings, family photographs and ornaments. Children played there during the day but it had to be quiet non-messy play. Women did some work there such as sewing or ironing (although these were done more usually in the kitchen) but this, and the children's toys were usually cleared away before the evening when the stofa was used to relax in, to talk, read or watch television. As the best room in the house, where the most valuable and cherished possessions were displayed, it was kept in a high state of order being regularly (at least weekly) dusted, hoovered and tidied up. This meant it was in a state of readiness



if visitors, who were something more than neighbours dropping in for coffee, arrived. It was this room which was used when life-cycle celebrations were held (see section 5.6). On these occasions guests acknowledged the successful negotiation of a step in the family's life by eating the most elaborate food in the best room in the house.

Casual visitors were entertained on a day to day basis in the kitchen (eldhús), the most public and most used room in the house. With one exception, all the Icelandic homes I knew had a large kitchen with a table at which all ordinary meals were eaten. Food was usually only eaten in the stofa at the life-cycle parties and on special occasions such as Christmas.

The kitchen was used in multiple and somewhat conflicting ways. It was here that a woman spent a large part of her time, preparing and cleaning away after meals and doing other work such as washing, ironing and sewing. If there were young children in the family they would often play in the kitchen so as to be under the woman's eye, even if this had the disadvantage of them being under her feet. The kitchen had to be tidied up several times a day and not only because of the mess created by the operations of cooking and eating. First, as mentioned other types of housework were often done in the kitchen. There was rarely enough space or a table in a bedroom and the ideal of a separate sewing room - a space for the woman justified as a place of work - was rarely achieved. So sewing, ironing or anything else done in the kitchen had to be cleared away before meals. Second, the kitchen was the most public room in the house because casual visitors were given coffee there. Unlike the stofa which could be tidied up before

invited guests arrived, there was always the likelihood that someone would drop in unexpectedly for coffee. So it was not just concern over hygiene which resulted in the kitchen being cleaned and tidied several times a day. Its multiple use meant that one thing had to be put away before another job was started and the chance of visitors arriving spurred the woman into keeping it in a reasonable state of order. The kitchen was very much the hub of the home where all the multiple functions of the home co-incided - work, communal family activity and the entertainment of visitors. For this reason it was the room that created the most work and engendered the most concern as to its state of cleanliness and order.

An Icelandic home was for a woman all hers in the sense that she was responsible for running it but in another sense none of it was particularly hers, not even to the extent of having a 'sewing room'. It can be said that housewives experience isolation but lack privacy.

#### 5.4. Invisible and Visible Work: From Method to Analysis

The creative and maintenance processes of housework can be divided into that which is visible and that which is invisible. The origin of this classification was the following conversation, taken from my fieldnotes. We were talking of Good Friday.

Guðrún "Tomorrow nobody works, all the shops and factories are closed. Is it like that in England?"

Marie Some shops close but not all. But you say nobody works - what about the housewives?

Guðrún No, women don't work.

Marie You mean we don't eat tomorrow?

Guðrún Of course women do the cooking. I mean women don't sew or do things like that."

The aim of this conversation from my viewpoint was to provoke a discussion of housework, to establish whether it was viewed in the same light as waged work. My initial question was therefore a leading one, deliberately posed, and the second a self-conscious naivety since I was sure we did eat on Good Friday. After I returned from Iceland I read a discussion of this technique by Omvedt who used as an example the issue of housework and her directing of Indian women to view it as work.

"From normal "value neutral" ideology of interviewing this might be viewed as cheating. It is asking leading questions; it suggests that men in fact do less work, that housework is real work, that women should think about these things differently. The point is that unless this happens the degree to which women reject the traditional system and are ready to act on that rejection can never be ascertained. My methodology for the year and a half of my study, as an effort to give some sense of the opinions, values, and ideas of women across a broad social spectrum, could indeed be called a "methodology of the leading question"."

(1979:384)

Omvedt went on to examine the validity of using such an approach; whether an "unorthodox" response is truly indicative of a rejection of the "normal" values of the interviewee's society or perhaps an example of deferential agreement with the opinions of the (possibly) higher

status interviewer.

During my fieldwork I believe I gained valuable information and insight by setting the scene for the discussion of topics not usually mentioned. In part this happened because I was an outsider and people solicited my views on many subjects. I re-inforced this in a variety of ways: asking questions of deliberate (and sometimes not so deliberate) naivety, strongly expressing my viewpoint in discussions and arguments and engaging in reciprocal exchanges of information. I would contend that this approach was crucial for someone engaging in participant-observation in Iceland, since the 'strongly held cultural ideal of personal equality and respect for the individual means that people are expected to express their own ideas and opinions. Revealing my own values meant that I could be seen as less of an uni-dimensional character "the English anthropologist" and more a person worth talking to. The same egalitarian ethos, coupled with the fact that I was a young woman working in the fish-factory and helping with the housework, meant that I was not viewed as of superior status<sup>4</sup> and I encountered very little if any deference. The danger of my totally directing conversations was minimal.

It was through doing housework, as much as talking about it, that I came to learn about this work in Iceland. It was expected by the women in whose homes I stayed and by myself, that I would help with housework. I did not initially take notes on this in my diary. I had done house-

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4. As explained (see section 1.5.3.) teenagers were rather shy of me, especially when I first arrived in Fróneyri. I do not think this was because I was seen as of superior status - rather I was of the adult world.

work for years, 'I knew all about it'. Just (1978) discussed the problems of anthropologists who study societies which are not so very different from their own. In this case I ignored something of overwhelming familiarity until it was forced upon my attention. No doubt if it had been somewhere 'exotic' I would have taken copious notes immediately, on cooking and cleaning activities.

What began to remedy my selective inattention was, for instance, being taught three different methods of washing up by three women in whose homes I stayed. The different systems were:

- a. hot rinse, hot soapy wash.
- b. hot soapy soak, hot rinse.
- c. cold rinse, hot soapy wash, hot rinse.

On one occasion I broke the rules while the housewife was out and used my method: hot soapy wash, followed by a saucepanful of clean water thrown over the lot on the draining board. I was corrected by the husband who said his wife wanted it done in such and such a manner. It is interesting that in this context he referred to his wife not by her name, Guðrún, nor as his wife (konan mín) but used the word húsfreyjan, which is best translated as the mistress of the house. I interpret his rather formal usage as an emphasis of her role, making it clear that the house was her sphere and that I had shown disregard for her position by breaking the rules in her absence. On another occasion I had to re-wash the kitchen ceiling during spring cleaning because, although I could not perceive it, it was not done well enough. As stated, housekeeping is largely learnt by doing, so participation was the appropriate strategy for me

to learn about and understand it. What these two incidents demonstrated is that it is not only the standard of the end product (the ceiling) which is important in housekeeping, but also the process, the way of doing things (the washing up).

#### 5.4.1. Invisible Housework

There are two ways in which the whole of domestic work in Iceland can be understood as invisible. First, it is done by a woman alone in the home and thereby is not seen to be done. In industrial society, not only is housework unwaged, it is hidden, which contributes to it being perceived as non-work. The second way in which housework is rendered invisible is that the contribution of women's domestic work to the overall economic system is unacknowledged. As Bujra put it:

"....it has become 'invisible', its contribution to capital obscured by the separation effected between domestic and industrial units, between production and consumption, between wage labour and 'free labour.'"

(1978:22)

I would further contend that close examination of housekeeping activities reveals that some are more hidden than others. I thus disagree with Rabuzzi who made a different distinction of the visible and tacit:

"In the case of women's traditional work, the business of housewifery, only the purposeful aspects - those concerned with producing and maintaining order and cleanliness and preparing food - are visible: everything else is tacit."

(1982:94)

I argue that it is precisely many of the activities that Rabuzzi

mentioned which can be understood as invisible housework.

Returning to the reported conversation, it revealed that housework did not cease entirely on Good Friday like waged work, but there were aspects of housework which were proscribed. Consideration of this division of the activities grouped under the term housework led to the identification of the category of "the invisible". The invisible aspects of housework are those which cannot readily be named as discrete jobs, things such as tidying away shoes and toys, plus those jobs which are so routine they become invisible.

To amplify the last point; many of housewife's activities are part of a process of creating and maintaining order; dusting, vacuum cleaning, washing and providing three meals a day. They are done regularly, daily or weekly, and have no permanent, tangible, end product. The order is preserved for only a limited time; crockery gets dirty three or more times a day, clothes are cleaned only to become dirty, beds are unmade nightly. These tasks are unrewarding and unrewarded. They are ultimately unrewarding to the housewife herself since although a room tidied or a pile of clothes ironed may provide a brief pleasure, there is the constant knowledge that it will all have to be done again - soon. They are unrewarded because the state of order set by the housewife becomes one to which the family is accustomed so it deserves no special praise or mention. The only time these invisible tasks become visible and worthy of mention is when there is a breakdown; when lunch is not on the table at midday and washing up is left in the sink. The invisible becoming visible in this context signals failure not achievement.

This is confirmed by the things women apologised for when they had visitors. They so often apologised for the state of their homes. To be caught with an untidy, dirty home was worst. This signalled failure to deal with the evil of dirt. de Beauvoir identified the position of the housewife as a Manichæist one, battling with the negative evil principle (op.cit.:470). A dirty home was a moral failure. Even being seen to be involved in the activity of creating order was something of an embarrassment. It was as if these tasks should not be seen to be done because this admits that disorder occurs. The product of a successful engagement with disorder was to be appreciated<sup>5</sup> but not the process of the battle. Furthermore, apologies were given even if no disorder was apparent to the visitor; the dust under the television in the immaculate living room was pointed out. It was acknowledged so that if the guests' x-ray eyes spotted it, the housewife had already covered herself by demonstrating that she knew it was there and it would be dealt with. A housewife is constantly alert against creeping disorder.

The invisibility of this type of maintenance is compounded by the fact that the details of the order are hidden from all eyes but those of the woman herself. It is her particular arrangement of dishes in the cupboard, her choice of which saucepan is used for what purpose, her eyes which decide if a shirt is well-ironed. The rest of the family know only in a general sense where everything ought to be and how everything ought to be done. Sharing

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5. Appreciated in the sense of accepted. As indicated the good order of the home was not singled out for praise.



the housework with a woman means entering the invisible rhythm of the work and learning the secret of her order and standards.

The housewife's methods are not completely hidden, as the incident when Steindór ticked me off, demonstrated. The rest of the family have some idea of how things should be done and actually do some work. The amount of men's participation in housework varied greatly from household to household but it is a valid generalisation that they tended to do one-off jobs such as taking out the rubbish, hanging out the washing, bathing the children, often in response to the housewife's request. They did not do all those routine tasks—wiping down surfaces, tidying newspapers, plumping cushions and picking up scattered toys; that endless stream of things which become so internalised and part of a woman's movements around 'her domain', stooping, bending, tidying.

In Fróneyri a man's contribution was seen as help "He's a good man he helps so much in the house", but clearly the main responsibility of running the home, doing the thinking and maintaining the order belonged to the woman<sup>6</sup>. Older women in Fróneyri expressed the idea that there was more sharing of housework among young people.

"Now men and women are equal the young men do a lot in the home. My husband is too old, I know him and can't get him to change now"

Certainly, I never saw the old pattern described by a Reykjavík woman, of the men doing nothing in the home,

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6. In a report by the Marriage Research Centre of newly-weds in Britain, help with the shopping, washing-up and bed-making were the jobs most likely to be done by men. They did the washing and ironing only if the woman was ill.

being served their meals by the women who sat silent while the men ate. However, my own observations and the comments of younger women revealed that while young men may have done more than their fathers they were far from taking equal responsibility.

One young woman, Sigrún, who wanted to equalise the participation in housework was finding it difficult to achieve. Her husband Davíð was willing to be involved but she felt pressure, both because she suffered amused scepticism, bordering on censure, from her in-laws and because she felt reluctant to enter into a pedagogic relationship with her husband. This was illustrated when her husband made blue-berry jam. As she did not eat it she had refused to make it, and he had left it to cool without lids, with the consequent danger of germs or mould infecting the jam. She knew it was wrong, I knew it was wrong and her mother-in-law knew it was wrong. The woman was unwilling either to cover the jam or tell her husband to do so. In a subsequent conversation she spoke of how difficult she found the negotiation of these attempts to involve her husband in the domestic work. In many ways she felt it made things harder since it meant not doing things which she could have done more competently herself, a certain friction with her in-laws and the feeling that she was constantly telling her husband what to do.

She also recognised that she had some resistance to giving up her control over the home; that it was something of a threat to her authority when her husband did get involved in housekeeping. She was unusual in explicitly mentioning this. However, an indication of similar feelings was afforded by those women who half-ruefully/half- proudly

said their husbands were useless around the home or words to that effect. This was most often said in connection with cooking. "When I'm away all he eats is porridge": "He can just about fry an egg". On the other hand, men who could cook well were described as making an awful mess in the kitchen when they did so.

While being on the surface, statements about men's domestic competence, the underlying message was that the women were the skilled housekeepers and 'in charge' of the home. The elaboration of their way of doing things, for instance the various methods of washing up, is another way in which women extended their authority in this sphere.

Men's perception of the work involved in housekeeping and their attempts to help are illustrated in the following short case study. During the summer the household in which I lived swelled in numbers considerably, from four to twelve at times, and it was felt that Guðrún was doing too much work. The problem was most manifest at mealtimes when so many people had to be fed and it was obvious that Guðrún herself was getting no chance to eat. The extra work she was doing was by no means limited to mealtimes but it was most obvious then.

At the instigation of her husband Steindór and son Kristján, a change in the seating arrangements was made. "Those who work" (þeir sem vinna) were to eat first: that was Guðrún, Steindór, Kristján, two sons-in-law, the eldest grandson and myself. The second sitting was the two daughters Lára and Jóhanna, two granddaughters and the younger grandson. The division of workers and non-workers is in itself interesting. The husband, son, grandson and I myself worked

in the fish-factory and Guðrún was the housewife for whom the changes were being made. The two sons-in-law were visiting on holiday and helping their in-laws by painting the exterior of the house and assisting in the hay harvest. The daughters and other grandchildren were non-workers by implication, although this was never explicitly stated. The women, also on holiday from their waged work and their own houses, were carrying out all their childraising duties, working on the hay harvest, clearing up the garden, painting the house and doing housework. As they were in the second sitting with the younger children, they not only served the rest of us but had to supervise the children which interrupted their own meal.

Within three days the system was cracking and the point of it was lost when Guðrún stopped eating at the first sitting in order to supervise the whole meal. The younger grandson, aged ten, revealed his perception of the order by rebelling against "eating with the women". That left the two sittings as the men and myself, followed by the other women and girls. As I only worked half a day in the factory I was a slightly ambiguous member of the category worker (although unambiguously a woman) and at evening meals especially I was often placed in the second sitting.

Obviously Steindór and Kristján's attempt to alleviate the load on Guðrún failed, despite their genuine wish to do something about it. I had discussed the situation with both of them. They held the opinion that Guðrún had her way of doing things and this presented an almost insuperable barrier to their contributing in any way. Steindór said:

"Even when the girls<sup>7</sup> are here in the summer, she will not take help but does everything herself."

This was mystification because quite simply Lára, Jóhanna and I contributed in large measure to the housework. Lára did express similar sentiments to that of her father but what she said was subtly different. She acknowledged the difficulty of helping her mother but said the problem was not one of doing it, but of doing it in such a way that it did not disrupt Guðrún's routine or make her feel useless. Here was a crucial difference in the perception of the problem and the measure needed to be taken. For the men a bureaucratic, visible rationalisation of a particular situation was the one way they could devise to relieve Guðrún's workload. The women saw it more holistically: we had to infiltrate our energy into Guðrún's invisible system and thereby provide real help. So we washed and dried up, popped out for shopping and kept the children amused and out of the way. Through our training and experience we had the skill to help but not to change, to partake but not to take over.

In discussing the invisible order a woman brings to her home I am not suggesting that it is totally idiosyncratic. If it were, women would not be able to help each other in the manner described. Women learn first by watching and helping their mothers. This is the acquisition of practical mastery through doing which becomes elaborated into a particular invisible system when a woman comes to run her own home.

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7. He used the word stelpur (girls) rather than konur (women) to refer to his daughters.

#### 5.4.2. Visible Housework

Visible housework activities were distinguished by the production of items which lasted for some length of time. Also many of these tasks took place at a particular season of the year. Some types of cooking fell into this category: making rhubarb jam or blueberry cordial or paté and sausages after slaughtering the sheep in the autumn. One type of cleaning, the spring cleaning vorhreinsun was in the visible category. It took place at a particular time of the year, ideally before Whitsun and involved an extra amount of work: washing walls and ceilings, cleaning windows inside and out, the replacement of winter net curtains and cushion covers for lighter summer ones. It resulted in a visible change which was noticed and commented upon. Whereas to mention, in the ordinary course of events, that a house looked clean would be insulting - implying that usually this was not the case.

Icelandic women do a lot of knitting, dressmaking, crocheting and embroidery with silk and wool. Articles were made for utilitarian purposes, such as family clothing, and for display, bell pulls and tucked velvet cushions. Making these things enabled a woman to save on the family budget, displayed her skill and produced something which was tangible and not undone every day. On two occasions in Fróneyri I was shown all the handwork women had done, crocheted babyclothes, fine silk runners and table cloths, embroidered pictures. The articles produced endure and so contradict the usual rule of housekeeping, vividly described by de Beauvoir (op.cit.:473): what is made is consumed.

When doing visible housework a woman tended to be wholly engaged in it. She was not amenable to being interrupted, nor did she attempt to do other things at the same time. Time was put aside for doing these things. Women controlled the tempo of their work rather than having it determined for them. Also women did not stop and apologise for these activities. Rather the opposite. The process of sewing or jam making was discussed, techniques and recipes shared. The products were to be admired and could be given to others as gifts.

Handwork also provided a reason for women to have a social evening away from their own homes, as sewing circles were a feature of both towns and villages<sup>8</sup>. When discussing space in the home I contended that women could only achieve some privacy if this was justified by being purposeful or connected with some aspect of housework. Here women again created some time and space for themselves - this time collectively, when it was ostensibly linked to domestic work.

There was a feeling that much more than sewing went on in these clubs and this was articulated from a male view point in the novel Eldhúsmellur (Kitchen Whore) by Guðlaugur Arason.

"It wouldn't only be a sewing club but also a cultural and educational club which would give the Lions and Kiwanis good competition"

(1978:98)

This sewing club was visualised by its founder as a rival to the male-run social clubs, the Lions and Kiwanis.

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8. Similar collective sewing circles are found in other societies eg. clippy mat groups in the North-East of England.

Life in fact pre-empted art, because the discussions which led to the first demonstration on 1st May 1970 by what became the Rauðsokkar feminist movement was organised by women belonging to the same Reykjavík sewing club. They later formed the first workshop of the movement (see section 8.2). In this case a visible housework activity was the initial reason for a group of women to come together and to break out of their isolation. Out of this contact grew a political movement which questioned the role of women in Icelandic society and campaigned to change it.

In her article Sexual Insult and Female Militancy, Ardener (1975) makes explicit comparisons between the collective action of West African women and the modern feminist movement. An analogy can be drawn here between the transformation of the African women's traditional collective action over sexual insult for new purposes in the face of agricultural change and the impositions of colonial rule, and the growth of a political movement in Iceland from a traditional collective grouping of women.

Women are the people that physically produce the new members of society and are overwhelmingly assigned the task of initially rearing children. Women are creative agencies who through the tasks of raising children, keeping dirt at bay and cooking food ensure that human society is made and continued. Ortner has suggested that women are marginal and ambiguous vis-à-vis society because of the intermediate place they have between 'nature' and 'culture' and what is perceived to be their longer and more intimate involvement in biological processes (1974:77). A qualification of this symbolic association was made by Ortner her-



self (ibid: 74-80) and a universal and negative association of women with nature is by no means certain (MacCormack, 1980). I would argue on the basis of this analysis of the work done in Icelandic homes that not everything a housewife does is negatively evaluated. It is more ambiguous than that. Both the negative, invisible housework and positive, visible housework is necessary to the creation of a home. It is clear that in Iceland invisible housework involved some activities which were negatively valued such as cleaning and others such as routinely providing three meals a day which were neutral, in that they were unmarked. Other aspects of housekeeping were positively valued.

#### Invisible Housework

eliminating dirt + disorder

daily routine/rapidly undone

should not be seen to be done

apologised for

private/hidden

negatively or neutrally valued

#### Visible Housework

creating tangible products

special time/preserved for a time

may be seen to be done

discussed and shared

public/displayed

positively valued.

#### 5.5. Shopping

Although it could be seen as a chance to get out of the house, shopping was not an unalloyed pleasure in Iceland. Statements such as, "there will be nothing to eat tomorrow, I can't think of anything to buy", which was said as a rueful joke because of course there always was something to eat, made me aware that shopping can be problematic. Shopping, which includes the processes of

planning, budgeting and actually going to get the goods, involves a great deal of calculation. The practical difficulties in Iceland could be quite a problem, especially during the winter when snow covered the roads for months, meaning a tough walk with full shopping bags if no car was available. A woman with young children either had to ask someone to keep an eye on them or take them along. My impression, from when I 'borrowed' toddlers, was that taking children on shopping trips tended to double the time and effort involved.

What was it apart from these very practical considerations that made shopping a problem, particularly food shopping which seemed the main issue? First although a woman was in charge of the cooking, she did not have the free choice of menu because she had to take account of her family's tastes and her dishes may be critically and vocally assessed by the family. Everyday Icelandic food was plain fare (the typical recipe, humorously described, was "boil the fish, boil the potatoes") and the use of spices and foreign-inspired dishes was minimal in Fróneyri. I did find the women I knew interested in talking about English food; they copied my recipe for Christmas cake, tried the curry I made and expressed horror at eating rabbit (classified as a rodent and totally inedible in their eyes). However, incorporating new ideas into the menu depends on family approval. In the household where I stayed, Guðrún established a curry sauce to go with fish, although it had to be weak to the point of tastelessness to be eaten by Steindór, and spaghetti did not re-appear after her son had rejected it.

A second factor was the limited choice of foods available in the shops, especially in the winter. When roads got blocked, supplies, especially of vegetables, were reduced and it made producing a varied and interesting diet difficult when potatoes and onions were the only ones available. The situation was somewhat better in Reykjavík where there was a choice of shops but prices for more 'exotic' vegetables were high<sup>9</sup>.

This leads to a third consideration, budgeting. Women were responsible for the routine expenditure of a household although major purchases of household goods were discussed. Icelandic households were financially dependent on the incoming wages. Women contributed to the budget through their wages, saved on expenses by making clothes and attempted to budget their shopping carefully. However, unless strict accounts were kept, a thing I never saw done, women were vulnerable to the accusation of extravagance. It was often difficult to see 'where the money goes' because what was bought: food, toiletries and cleaning stuffs, was rapidly consumed. On the other hand, a large consumer durable, like a television, stood in the home and was proof of how the money was spent. So everyday shopping, for food especially, is invisible shopping because the goods disappear rapidly but buying a large consumer durable is visible shopping.

In a small community like Fróneyri women were even open to extra-familial criticism, as the following incident recounted by a woman demonstrated. She was buying a leg of pork, which was much higher priced than lamb, and another

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9. During my first winter in Reykjavík, small leeks, individually wrapped in cling-film, were selling for the equivalent of £1 each.

woman asked how she could afford it since she was not earning a wage. In fact both she and her husband were wage earners and could well afford to eat pork if they so chose. The knowledge that the other woman's comment was based on inaccurate information did not defuse her anger at this public reprimand, since by implication it cast doubts on her ability to run a home well.

In going shopping, women have to consider family tastes, their budget and the effort of actually going to the shops, which may be considerable if it has to be fitted into the fish-factory coffee break. It is not the shopping per se which is a problem but the calculation that goes into it. The whole business can become a strain, expressed I suggest, in the voiced sentiments "if someone else would buy the food and put it in front of me I would cook it".

#### 5.6. Food

As Lévi-Strauss (1970) wrote, the cooking of food transforms that which is of nature for society's use. Further, the sharing of certain types of food with particular people delineates our relationship to them. Douglas has written that food can be seen as a code.

"If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries".

(1975:249)

In cooking and presenting the food women are therefore engaged in a process which is expressive of the ordering of society. To attempt to understand some of the messages

encapsulated in the taking of food in Iceland I propose to break it into two categories, everyday (invisible) and celebratory (visible), and then consider the content of these categories.

Everyday food consisted of the three main meals of breakfast (morgunmatur), lunch (miðdegismatur), and dinner (kvöldmatur) plus coffee breaks called kaffitími. The daily meals (in Icelandic the words mean literally morning, midday and evening food) were eaten by the family in the home and the food itself was simple and took little time to prepare. Breakfast was porridge or cereal or soured milk followed by bread, cheese or eggs. Lunch and dinner were boiled fish or meat, potatoes, a tinned vegetable. Dessert was usually a milk pudding or a fruit soup.

Coffee breaks were also daily events but were not tied to particular times like meals. They occurred inbetween the meals, sometime during the morning, afternoon and evening. The words used to describe coffee breaks in workplaces, hlé (break) and pása (pause) demonstrate that there were intermediary events, breaking into whatever else was going on. Coffee, fresh-ground and kept hot in thermos flasks, was available at all times in Icelandic homes. A coffee break meant setting the table and having coffee with kaffibrauð (literally coffeebread), which was bread with cheese, salami, tomatoes and cucumber, sweet biscuits and home-made or shop-bought cakes.

Cakes were not usually eaten at the three everyday meals and baking was not everyday cooking. Although there was no set baking day, perhaps because bread was no longer made in the home, a housewife would regularly spend half a day or more, making enough cakes to last for a while.

These were stored in the freezer, to be brought out and thawed as necessary. The most common types of cake, eaten at coffee breaks, were sponges filled with jam, raisins or glacé cherries. If Icelandic pancakes (which are eaten cold) were served they were sprinkled with sugar and rolled up.

The cakes eaten on celebratory occasions were significantly different. The basic sponges were still there but they were decorated on the outside with cream and fruit, as were meringue pavlovas. These cakes were called (terta), specifically rjómaterta (cream gateaux). Even a savoury 'cake' popular in Fróneyri looked like a gateau. It was three rounds of a Scotch-pancake-like mixture sandwiched with mayonnaise, prawns and chopped hard-boiled egg. Icelandic pancakes served at parties were filled with jam and cream and folded into a triangle. These cakes were light, creamy and brightly decorated. My own contribution at one party, an English fruit cake, dark brown and heavy, looked sadly out of place and did not get eaten.

The occasions at which these cakes were eaten were the parties veisla which celebrated important events in the life-cycle: christenings, birthdays, confirmation, wedding anniversaries and funerals<sup>10</sup>. The food did not constitute a meal, unlike the food at other celebrations. These were the national holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Seamen's Day, National Day and the þorrablót (February Feast). On the public holidays a meal was eaten in the home by the family. The main dish was meat: roast lamb, smoked lamb,

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10. I never attended a wedding but was told that they were marked either by a cake and coffee party in the home or an outside-catered meal.

ptarmigan, gammon or turkey. At the þorrablót, a public dinner held in the village hall, the food was what was stated to be the most traditional Icelandic food: pickled rams' testicles, sheeps' head, buried shark, blood and liver sausage.

If these different types of food and meals are decoded they can be seen to symbolise important aspects of Icelandic life: family and community, individual and nation. male and female. The everyday meals were unelaborate, invisible meals, totally necessary for the continuance of life but hidden by their very regularity. It was at coffee breaks that casual visitors were entertained. People were either told to come at coffee time or someone dropping in would be given coffee and brauð. In the village these visitors were relatives of some kind or people with whom one had grown up, so kaffitími was a relaxed time for talk and no elaborate display was necessary. They were seen as a time primarily for women, as indicated by the word kaffikerlingar. This literally means coffee old women and is difficult to translate idiomatically. It refers to women, of any age, sitting around drinking coffee, talking. There was no equivalent for men. In section 5.3. the fact that women have no place in the home was mentioned. In a sense coffee breaks provided an opportunity, legitimated by the taking of food and drink, for women to create a time and place for themselves. This was recognised in the semi-affect-ionate/semi-derogatory term kaffikerlingar applied to them.

Guests were specifically invited, usually by the woman, to the parties which celebrated an individual's journey through the life-cycle. It was the time when a woman quite literally displayed her culinary skill, the

products of housework, because the elaborate cakes were laid out on a table for all to see and admire. Women helped each other on these occasions by sharing recipes, lending extra crockery and cutlery and by serving and cleaning away during the actual party. Men seemed to take a back seat, sitting in groups talking or even playing chess.

The care a woman had taken in steering her family through life was mirrored in the care taken in producing the cakes. Pancakes, above all were the symbol of an Icelandic woman's skill. The recipe was given to me more than once, an English friend received the special skillet needed to make them as a present when she married an Icelander. In Fróneyri the Women's Association (equivalent of the Women's Institute) had, in the 1960s sold them from a stall on the first day of summer.

Coffee breaks (Kaffitími)

ordinary sponges often oblong

sugared pancakes rolled up

Parties (Veisla)

decorated gateaux round

jam and cream filled pancakes folded in triangles

The everyday sponges and pancakes symbolise everyday life and routine, while the party cakes marked significant events. They also epitomise the skills a woman brings to running a home; the hidden skill of making a good sponge or wafer-thin pancake and that extra amount of labour and degree of care (the icing on the cake?) that lifts life beyond the routine and functional. The pair of cakes eaten at parties, the gateaux and pancakes, would seem to emphasise this as they were inversions of each other. The



decoration on gateaux covered the relatively plain interior while the pancakes had a bland exterior and jam and cream inside. It is through the balancing of routine and extra skills that a woman achieves success in her family: a combination of the visible and the invisible.

The national holidays and porrablót concerned the world outside the family, the public world of Church, State and the community as a whole. They were marked by events such as parades, sports, church services and dances held in the streets and public buildings. These celebrations refer to the world outside the home which is largely male-dominated and where women's contribution is restricted or unacknowledged. The food reflected this because it was meat and fish which was associated more with men, as farmers and fishermen, despite the work women did in farming and fish processing.

The porrablót was the one meal eaten outside the home. The name comes from the pagan Viking feast held during the month of porri. Unlike the holidays mentioned above, it did not mark a particular day, it celebrated being. Being an Icelander, in that the food was the "most traditional"; being a member of a particular community, because the whole village came together in the village hall. There were no guests at a porrablót because all were there by virtue of their residence in the village and food was brought by every household and shared.

While these holiday meals marked the events of the public world and the food was the meat associated with men, rather than the cakes associated with women, most of the work to produce these meals was done by women. At a party held in the home the women's work was quite evident. It

was more hidden, the labour disguised, on the national celebratory occasions; just as their total contribution to the economy and public life was rendered invisible.

<u>Everyday meal</u>	<u>Coffee break</u>	<u>Parties</u>	<u>Public Holiday</u>	<u>þorrablót</u>
meals	non-meals	non-meals	meal	meal
daily routine	break	life-cycle events	church/state	community/nation
family	casual visitors	invited guests	family	village
invisible housework by women	time/space for women	display/visible housework by women	women's work disguised	women's work disguised

#### 5.7. Conclusions

In this chapter the analysis of what was for a long time a neglected, even trivialised topic, the running of a home, has demonstrated how important it is to examine this aspect of a culture. The creation and running of a home is very much the responsibility of women in Iceland. Indeed it is still very largely their primary responsibility. The participant-observation method resulted in the accumulation of data which was culturally specific in terms of some aspects of the work and the symbolic significance of food and meals. But the analysis would seem to be relevant to any society where industrialisation has resulted in the home no longer being a centre for the production of goods for the market and women have to combine the role of unwaged housewife and waged labour.

This part of the thesis, called Invisible Women, has looked at the life of women, in the past and the present,

which was largely routine, unrecognised, uncelebrated.

The following two parts, Visible Women and Becoming Visible, examine a time when women made themselves massively visible by coming together, and the process of becoming visible in which The Women's Day Off was one event.

VISIBLE WOMEN

# 19. JÚNÍ

Ársnið Kvenréttindafélags Íslands 1976



Figure xv The Centre Of Reykjavík On The Women's Day Off 24.10.1975 (From 19. Júní 1976)

women's day off

CHAPTER SIX - KVENNAFRÍDAGURINN6.1. Introduction

This part of the thesis is a discussion of remarkable event which was perhaps a turning point in the history of Icelandic women. On the 24th October 1975 the second largest public meeting in Iceland's history took place in Reykjavík. The lowest estimate of the size of the crowd was 19,000, the highest 30,000. The one event to draw a bigger crowd was held at Þingvellir in 1974 when more than 80,000 people met to celebrate Iceland's 1100th anniversary. What was unique about the crowd gathered together in 1975 was that those there were almost exclusively women. Just an occasional male figure is to be seen in pictures taken on that day.

The 24th October is United Nations Day and it was chosen in Iceland as the culmination of International Women's Year, to be marked by Kvennafrídagurinn (The Women's Day Off). The largest meeting was in Reykjavík but all around the country women did something to celebrate the day. In Akureyri, the second town of Iceland, 1000 women held a meeting, in Ísafjörður a full day's programme of events was held and in small villages and on isolated farms women took the day off. A woman from a small east coast fishing village told me that the women had all gone to the school house for the day. They talked, sang songs and got their husbands to cook the meals that day.

The results of a sample survey carried out before The Day, suggested that 90% of Reykjavík women and 99% of those

living outside the capital planned to mark the day in some way. Whatever the exact numbers of women who took part, it is not disputed that the nation was brought to a halt as women waged workers and housewives left their offices, factories and homes. Although there have been attempts in other countries to hold similar events, the Icelandic Kvennafrídagur is the only truly successful one, in terms of mobilising mass support, so far. It is a unique event.

Yet from conversations I had, and reports in books and newspapers, it is clear that reaction to the Kvennafrí varied a good deal. In 1976, a year after the event, a Rauðsokkar (Redstocking) feminist told me that it was a past event and:

"50% of women knew what the day was about, while the rest took it as a holiday."

The idea of it being a holiday, trivialising its significance was expressed by a couple of male teachers I talked to.

"Lots of women just had a holiday and went to the dentist and did such things."

In 1978, a founder member of the Redstockings Movement said to me that:

"The Kvennafrí was a failure as a political action. It was good to see so many women together, but but it was not a great blow in political terms."

A similar view was expressed by Þuríður Magnúsdóttir and Gerður Steinþórsdóttir, two members of the organising committee for The Day Off, in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet (8.3.1980). Under the headline All Icelandic Women Struck in 1976(sic) - The Strike Has Left Few Traces, the question was asked "has no trace been left?"

Þuríður replied:

"Not the strike itself. It was quite a unique phenomenon. But we got an Equal Rights Law in 1976, as the first Nordic country. With that we got formal, but not real equality.

It is possible we exaggerate and are too pessimistic, and that we were so very over-optimistic and thought a lot would happen at the top"

(translation by Judith Jesch)

Writing some years later, after the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as President of Iceland, Gerður Steinþórsdóttir wrote

"To me, one of the thousands who celebrated 24th October 1975, it is unforgettable, hugely important and historic. I believe without it Vigdís Finnbogadóttir would not have been elected President on 29th June 1980. It is good to have lived at this time and have taken part in the forging of history".

(1980:54)

These reactions to the Kvennafri illustrate how varied are the responses to such an event. It is clearly not a phenomenon which is easily classified in terms of its meaning or success. Some saw it as a non-political event which failed to achieve tangible results, others emphasised the symbolic importance. In this chapter the Kvennafri is described and analysed: its inception and planning, why so many women took part and its relationship to other forms of action.

## 6.2. The Idea of a Women's Strike

Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir, one of the founders of the feminist Rauðsokkahreyfing (Redstockings Movement) proposed the holding of a strike at the first open meeting of the



newly-founded Movement in October 1970.

"Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir gave a forceful speech on the bad position of working mothers and called attention to the motion, which Adda Bara Sigfúsdóttir had recently put to the City Council: that married women be provided with facilities for their children so that they would have the opportunity to study and work outside the home. Such crèches would be invaluable and she proposed that women should show their interest on this matter by action, by meeting in the public gallery on the day the motion was to be discussed or take radical action like a strike"

(þjóðviljinn:21.10.70)

Two of the founder members of the Rauðsokkahreyfing<sup>1</sup> told me that the idea of a strike came up again in the spring of 1974, at a meeting to discuss International Women's Year but it was badly received by some people there. One of the main arguments used against it was that some people would lose their jobs<sup>2</sup>. The Rauðsokkar broached the idea again in the autumn of 1974 and in January 1975 at a meeting held to discuss women's low pay. There was a move to hold a strike on March 8th, International Women's Day, but the Rauðsokkar were fully involved at the time in researching low pay so it was delayed.

Planning to hold the Kvennafri began after the congress held in June 1975 to mark International Women's Year, when the following resolution was passed.

"The Women's Congress held in Reykjavík June 20th and 21st 1975, urges women to take a day off on October 24th, United Nations Day, in order to demon-

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1. They are not identified at their own request
  2. Certain workers in Iceland do not have a legal right to strike

strate the importance of their work".

(Forsætisráðuneytið, 1977:54)

### 6.3. The Context

The resolution to hold The Women's Day Off did not take place in a vacuum. 1975 had been declared International Women's Year by the United Nations and in Iceland both the State and women's organisations of all types had been preparing for the year. In 1974 two committees were set up to plan the events: one by Menningar-og Friðarsamtök Íslenskra Kvenna (M.F.Í.K.) (The Women's Union for Culture and Peace) and the other by Kvenfélagasamband Íslands (K.F.S.Í.) (The National Organisation of Women's Societies), Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (K.R.F.Í.) (Women's Rights Association of Iceland), Kvenstúdentafélag Íslands (K.S.F.Í.) (Women's Students Association of Iceland), Félag Háskólakvenna (F.H.K.) (Association of University Women), Rauðsokkahreyfingin (Rsh.) (The Redstockings Movement) and Félag Sameinuðu þjóðanna á Íslandi (F.S.þ.Í.) (United Nations Association of Iceland), which between them represented 30,000 people.

In August 1974 the Education Ministry wrote to various women's organisations asking for ideas on how to celebrate the year and in January 1975 the President's office announced the appointments to the women's year committee from the following organisations: K.F.S.Í. (2), K.R.F.Í. (1), Rsh. (1), F.S.þ.Í. (1), F.H.K. and K.S.F.Í. (1). Guðrún Erlendsdóttir, a lawyer, was its chairwoman.

In 1975 International Women's Year started with the opening of the Women's History Library of Iceland and the meeting organised by the Rauðsokkar to discuss low

pay (see section 8.8.2.). The Rauðsokkar held another meeting in February with the Association of Childrens Nurses among others to discuss crèches and pre-school facilities. March 8th, International Women's Day, was celebrated by the Women's Union for Culture and Peace in the Nordic House (a cultural centre) in Reykjavík and an exhibition of women's art was held in the same venue throughout the month.

In June a festival (Hátíðarfundarinn) was formally opened on the 14th and addressed by Eva Kolstad from Norway (a member of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women). There was music, poetry recitals and a presentation, later broadcast on the radio, on the working role of women in Iceland's history. On June 20th-21st a congress, organised by the International Women's Year Committee, was held. There, 300 delegates from all parts of the country, after speeches, broke into workshops to discuss among other things: Iceland and World Peace, Women and Science, Women in the University of Iceland, the Teaching of Domestic Science, Housewives in Rural Areas, the Struggle for Equal Rights and the Position of Women in the Fish-factories.

Among the other events held throughout 1975 were an exhibition of works of art by women held in the National Art Gallery, and an exhibition of "Art in Everyday Life - Women's Work". This displayed articles and clothing from Iceland, the Faroes, Greenland and Sweden and was shown in Reykjavík, Neskaupstaður, Akureyri, Ísafjörður and Patreksfjörður. There were programmes on the radio by the Red-stockings and Women's Students Association and the B.B.C. series Shoulder to Shoulder was shown on television. A play written for International Women's Year, called Saumastofan

(The Sewing Factory) was put on in an Reykjavík theatre and the students at a highschool produced The Parliament of Women by Aristophanes. The State took part by sponsoring an essay competition for teenagers on the theme of the place of women in society and a stamp was issued featuring a painting by Nína Tryggvadóttir. These are only some of the things which took place that year.

It is within the context of this public recognition of International Women's Year that the Kvennafri, the form it took and the mass participation by women has to be understood.

#### 6.4. Kvennafrídagurinn

In order to describe the events of the day I have drawn upon the documents produced at the time which are held in the Women's History Library of Iceland, newspaper reports, later published accounts and the conversations I had with women who took part.

On the morning of 24th October all the national newspapers carried editorials about the position of women in Iceland and the radio played feminist songs. At midday, when public announcements are read on the radio, the presenter said

"Women of Iceland. Stand together.  
Come to the open houses. No one sit  
at home on The Women's Day Off.  
Women, meet together at Lækjatorg  
at 2 o'clock."

The meeting in the centre of Reykjavík started with the playing of Ethel Smythe's Suffragette March by a women's brass band. Speeches were made by three women who had been involved in organising the day, Aðalheiður Bjarnfreðsdóttir,

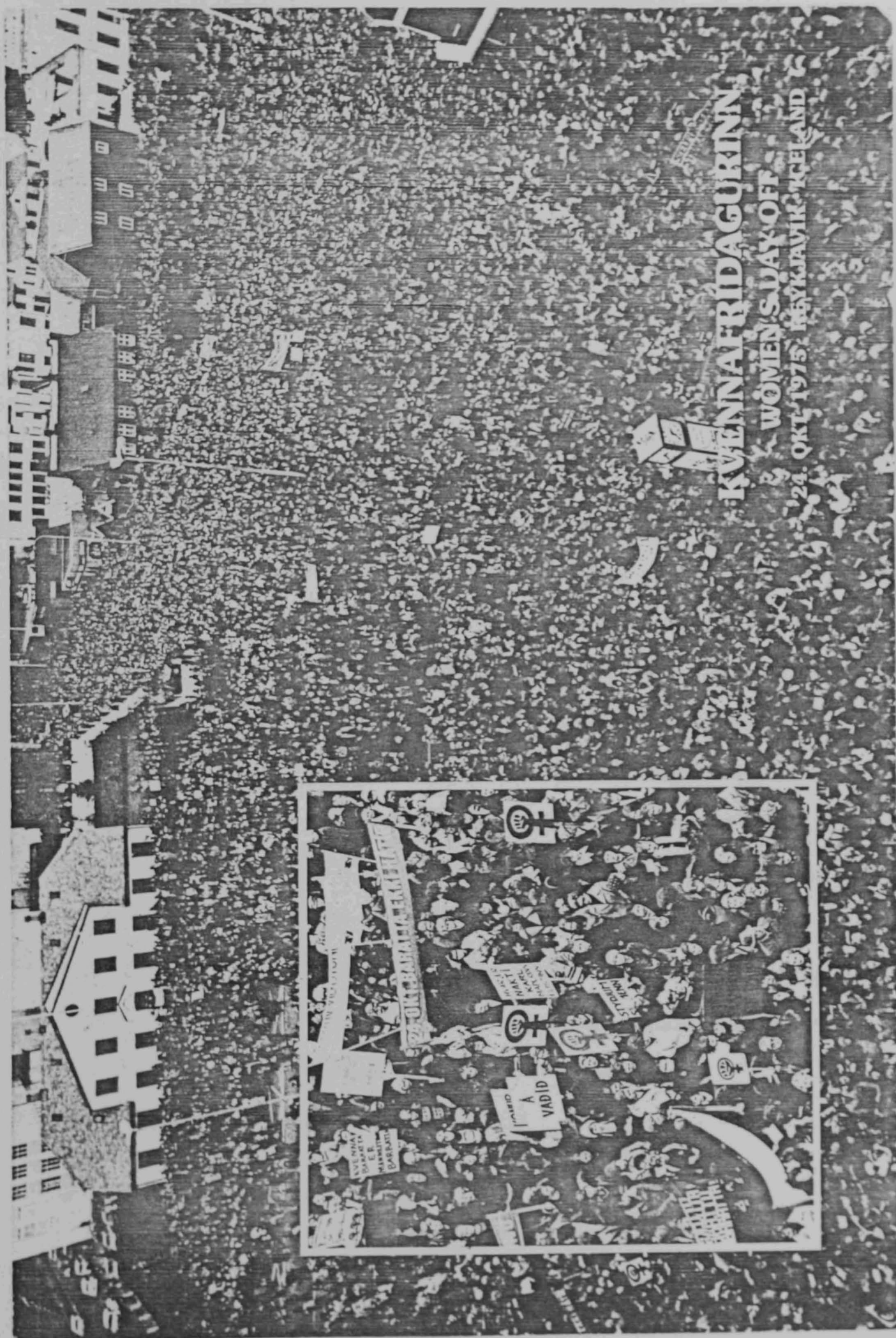


Figure xvi Reykjavik's Main Square On Kvinnafriðagurinn  
(Published By Kvenréttindafélag Íslands)

Björg Einarsdóttir and Ásthildur Ólafsdóttir. In part of her speech Aðalheiður said:

"The woman is waking up. She knows that men have ruled our world from the beginning of history. But how has that world been? It has been bleeding and burning in agony. I believe that this world will be a better place when women and men share all the power equally between them. I want and I trust that you too want the world to disarm. Everything else is political hypocrisy and trickery. We want to solve problems without deadly weapons."

(Einarsdóttir and Steinþórsdóttir, n.d.4-

Two of the three women then in parliament made speeches urging women to participate more fully in politics. Two organisations, the Women's Rights Association and Redstockings, put on programmes of songs, poems about women and the struggle for equality. The last item was a history of Icelandic women presented by six women. The two hour meeting was punctuated by community singing. Rather than go straight home, women were urged to go to the open-houses set up in Reykjavík, to drink coffee and be entertained by groups of musicians. That evening the whole of the evening's radio programme was given over to discussion of the day's events.

It was not only in Reykjavík that women marked this day. The programme for the day in Ísafjörður, the main town in Vestfirðir, was as follows:

- 10 am Morning exercises and sauna
- 12 Economical lunch, opening speech, music
- 2.30 pm Main meeting:
  - Speeches/Readings (Women in Literature)
  - Play
  - Music
  - Coffee

6.45 pm Two presentations by the Dramatic Society:  
 Four Men's Dances  
 The Last Witch Burning in Iceland  
 9 pm Film: Far From the Madding Crowd.

At the top of the programme, the wives of fishermen at sea were given a telephone number to ring if they needed a babysitter.

In the local newspaper (Ísafirðingur, 1.11.75) Ingibjörg Norðkvist reported and commented upon the Kvennafri in Ísafjörður. The first speaker, Þuríður Pétursdóttir said there would be no equal pay for women until there was a change in childrearing and education. In the afternoon the proceedings were started by Bryndís Schram who emphasised that the Kvennafri was not held to harm or attack anyone, but to highlight women's contribution to society. She was followed by Magdalena Sigurðardóttir who stated that housework was little taught, except at housewives schools and certainly little valued. (To an English eye the institutionalisation of the teaching of housework skills seems quite marked in Iceland with its 11 housewives schools). The reporter commented that a full-time housewife received no sick pay when ill, although even a part-time waged worker did. The difficulty of getting home-helps meant that a woman had to slave when she recovered because even though a husband might help, he was unable to do the work as well as a woman.

The next three women spoke on aspects of women's waged work. The former pointed out that women were in the majority on the low pay scales of the B.S.R.B. (the Civil Service and Local Government Workers Union) while the latter two talked of the struggle for equal pay in the

fish-factories. Before the coffee break there was a plea for women to throw off their inferiority complex, a talk on the situation of older women, an excerpt from the play Ertu Nú Ánægð Kerling (Are You Satisfied Now Woman) and a talk on how women were portrayed in books as mothers, lovers and housewives rather than workers. Coffee was provided by Pétur Sigurðsson and some other men, who the reporter wryly commented, looked like tired housewives.

In the open discussion after coffee, the suggestion was made that a man's employer should pay half the cost of maternity leave since women do not have babies alone. Another woman commented that a housewife's experience counts for nothing when she enters the wage-labour market. She gave as an example that after 10-20 years of childraising at home a woman who took a job in a crèche would receive the beginners' rate. She also said that widows and single mothers had extra expenses, if they had a paid job, because of the cost of home-helps and crèches.

The penultimate speaker extended this point by saying that a married man got cheap service which enabled him to work out in society "þess vegna kúga karlmenn konur" (In this way men oppress women). The discussion was closed by Bryndís Schram who talked of the importance of education "Hvað er menning manna, ef menntun vantar snót?" (What is man's education, if women lack learning?).

The newspaper reporter's final comment was

"As regards the position of women, I believe that there is no need for a revolution because "revolutions consume their children" which has been demonstrated throughout the world. I think that the oppression of women does occur in Iceland, this fine Women's Day Off has clearly



shown that, and there is a need for a major change of consciousness by both sexes concerning many issues and I do believe that this change of consciousness is continuously taking place".

#### 6.5. Why the Massive Support for the Kvænnafrídagur?

Some of the factors which contributed to the mass participation, as identified by two of the organisers, were as follows:

- "1. Iceland is a small country. The population is 220,000 and the country's size is that of Virginia.
2. Upto the turn of the century Iceland was a rural society. Since World War II the nation has become heavily urbanised. It is essentially a classless society. For instance, when the first female workers union was established in 1914, it was with the help of the Women's Rights Association. This Union (Framsókn) and many other trades unions are still affiliated to the Women's Rights Association.
3. The action was well planned, publicised and organised.
4. Icelandic women are used to making up their minds for themselves, having for a long time enjoyed more freedom than most of their sisters in other countries.
5. They had stood together before in the matter of the gynæcological hospital"

(Einarsdóttir and Steinþórsdóttir, op,cit.:6)

("The matter of the gynæcological hospital" was that in 1969-70 women organised a national campaign to build a specialist hospital. They made great use of the mass media and demonstrated in the Alþing (parliament). The hospital was opened in 1976. See section 7.5.).

The planning of The Day Off started after the June congress when eight women, deliberately chosen from different age groups and holding a variety of political views, put forward the motion which was passed by 72 votes to 28 against.

Here the idea of a strike, originally coming from what was publically perceived as the radical feminist movement, was taken up under the ægis of a State supported congress, and presented by a group of women chosen to be bi-partisan. The nature of the event was subtly changed into a celebration of women on United Nations Day, rather than a combative struggle by women. The change was epitomised by the use of the word frí (day off/holiday) to describe the event rather than verkfall (strike). Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir's original call had been for a strike in support of a specific issue. The title of the day (Kvennafrídagur) linked it semantically to other established celebratory holidays in Iceland such as Sjómannadagur (Seamen's Day), Frídagur Verkamanna (Workers' Day) and Frídagur Verslunarmanna (Merchants' Day) which are similar to Bank Holidays.

The reasons for calling *the event a day off* were that some women might be sacked for striking and that the aim was to get mass participation, and the concept of a strike might alienate some women (Einarsdóttir and Steinþórsdóttir, *ibid.*:3). Members of the Redstockings Movement believed at the time, and still did when I talked to them, that the change was a compromise but they had to agree to it because of the threat of some women losing their jobs.

Organisation of The Day Off went ahead at the end of August when the women who had proposed the motion met with a representative of the Redstockings. They asked over 50 organisations in the country to send representatives to a national conference to be held in early September. On September 15th a ten women executive committee was formed and two of these women headed each of the five planning groups: public relations, mass media, finance, programme for the day and

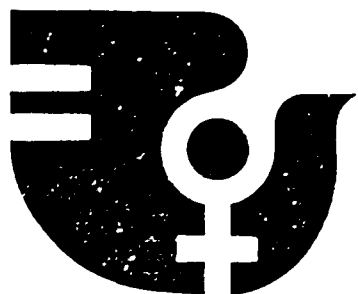
national (outside Reykjavík). A liaison officer, to co-ordinate contact between the groups was also appointed. Again the executive committee represented a range of professions: home-help, seamstress, housewife, clerk, computer operator, fish-factory worker and interior designer; and political persuasions: socialist, social democrat, conservative, liberal and non-political (Einarsdóttir, 1975). In all some 50 women worked towards organising the day.

In the few weeks before 24th October the executive committee contacted unions and the women's organisations for financial support and organised a massive publicity campaign. Building on the coverage in the mass media of International Women's Year, the publicity group contacted press, radio and television. Two of the national newspapers, Morgunblaðið (right-wing) and Þjóðviljinn (left-wing) had had special weekly pages on women's rights throughout the year and their editors were working to organise the day. Twenty five thousand little round stickers saying Kvennafrí were sold<sup>3</sup>, 6,000 posters featuring a picture of the statue The Waterbearer (a female figure with two buckets) with the words "stand together on the 24th October" were sent to workplaces and the circular letter (reproduced here in its Icelandic and English versions) were sent out. Forty seven thousand copies were produced - one for every five of the population

Despite all the planning, media coverage, a sample survey which had shown 80-100% of women in support and confident statements to the press, the committee had worries about the response to the Kvennafrí. Members of the Redstockings Movement said they were unsure whether it would not be a complete fiasco until a few days before the event. Steinþórsdóttir reported that on the night before, three members

3. these were still to be seen, stuck up in banks and post offices when I visited Iceland in August 1976.

KVENNAFRÍ  
24.OKT



## *Hvers vegna kvennafrí?*

Kvennaráðstefnan, haldin dagana 20. og 21. júní 1975, í Reykjavík, skorar á konur að taka sér frí frá störfum á degi Sameinuðu þjóðanna 24. október n. k. til að sýna fram á mikilvægi vinnuframlags síns.

Hvers vegna var tillaga sem þessi borin fram og samþykkt á ráðstefnu, þar sem saman voru komnar konur á öllum aldri, úr öllum stjórnmalaflokkum?

Ástæðurnar eru margar, en hér eru nokkrar:

- Vegna þess að vanti stafrsmann til illa launaðra og lítilsmetinna starfa, er auglýst eftir konu.
- Vegna þess að meðallaun kvenna við verslunar- og skrifstofustörf eru aðeins 73% af meðallaunum karla við sömu störf.
- Vegna þess að engin kona á sæti í aðalsamninganefnd Alþýðusambands Íslands.
- Vegna þess að mismunur á meðaltekjum verkakvenna og verkakarla er kr. 30.000.- á mánuði.
- Vegna þess að bændakonur eru ekki fullgildir aðilar að samtökum stéttar sinnar.
- Vegna þess að algengt svar er, þegar spurt er um starf konu, sem gegnir húsmóðurstarfi „hún gerir ekki neitt - hún er bara heima.“
- Vegna þess að til eru menn með ákvörðunarvald um stofnun dagvistarheimila fyrir börn, sem telja þau aðeins til að auka á leti kvenna.
- Vegna þess að vinnuframlag bændakvenna í búrekstri er metið til kr. 175.000 á ári.
- Vegna þess að kynferði umsækjanda ræður oft meira um stöðuveitingu en menntun og hæfni.
- Vegna þess að starfsreynsla húsmóður er einskis metin á vinnumarkaðinum.

Sameiginleg niðurstaða er sú, að framlag kvenna til samfélagsins sé lítils virt.

Sýnum okkur sjálfum og öðrum, hve mikilvægt framlag okkar er, með því að leggja niður vinnu 24. október.

Sameinumst um að gera daginn að eftirminnilegum baráttu- og sameiningardegi undir kjörorðum kvennaárs Sameinuðu þjóðanna:

**JAFNRÉTTI - FRAMÞRÓUN - FRIDUR**

**Framkvæmdanefndin um kvennafrí.**

Figure xvii The Circular Announcing The  
Women's Day Off

WHY A DAY OFF FOR WOMEN?

The Women's Congress, held in Reykjavík, June 20th and 21st 1975, urges women to take a day off on October 24th, the United Nations' Day, in order to demonstrate the importance of their work.

Why was a motion like that put forward and carried at a congress where women of all ages and political parties were assembled?

The reasons are many and here are but a few:

- Because when someone is needed for a badly paid low-status job the advertisement specifies a woman.
- Because average wages of women in trade and commerce are only 75% of the average wages of men doing the same jobs.
- Because the principal negotiation body of the Icelandic Trades Union Congress has no woman representative.
- Because the difference between the average monthly earnings of women and men laborers is icel. kr. 30.000.- (approx. £100. or \$200.-)
- Because farmers wives are not accepted as full members of the Farmer's Union.
- Because it is commonly said about a housewife "she isn't working - just keeping house".
- Because there are men in authority unable or unwilling to understand that day nurseries are a necessary part of modern society.
- Because the work contribution of farmers wives on the farms is not valued at more than icel.kr. 175.000.- (approx. £500.- or \$1100.-) a year.
- Because whether an applicant for a job is male or female is often considered more important than education or competence.
- Because the work experience of a housewife is not considered of any value on the labor market.

The general conclusion is that women's contribution to the community is underestimated.

Let us demonstrate to ourselves and to others the importance of our role in society by stopping work on October 24th.

Let us unite in making the day a memorable one under the theme of the International Women's Year:

EQUALITY - DEVELOPMENT - PEACE

Executive committee for women's day off.

of the committee had disturbing dreams: one of an avalanche, a second that she was standing naked in Lækjatorg Square and a third that she was standing there alone and the clock was striking two (op.cit.:52).

In the event there was a massive collective response to Kvennafrídagurinn. This can be explained in large measure by the interest aroused during International Women's Year, the organisational and publicity effort, and the utilisation of the existing women's organisations as lines of communication and the previous experience of collective effort by women. There was a conjunction of an external, international event and particular national factors. The specific message of the Kvennafrí was very carefully put across to appeal to all women. The Rauðsokkahreyfing characterised this as a compromise and undemanding, but as the circular letter and statements made at the Reykjavík and Ísafjörður meetings show, some quite powerful statements about women's position in society were made. If the circular letter is considered it seems that it was the style of presentation that was crucial.

The slogan for the day was "Equality, Development, Peace" and the general call was for a celebration of women's contribution to the nation. The Kvennafrí was promoted as being for and about women, rather than being against anything. The circular letter contained a mixture of statements of fact and opinions which appealed to reasonableness and common experience: the wage differences between women and men, the poor representation of women on the Icelandic T.U.C., discrimination against farmers' wives, the idea of housework being considered non-work and not relevant work experience, discrimination in job advertisements and selection of candidates for

posts. The statement about the provision of crèches was singular in that it was the only one which directly criticised men - but only some men in authority, rather than being a blanket condemnation. In fact this is the only part of the letter where the Icelandic wording significantly differs from the English version which was produced. The former stated that the men in authority believe that nurseries only increase women's laziness. The latter that the men are unable or unwilling to understand that today nurseries are a necessary part of modern society.

The statements highlighted the areas in which nearly all women have experience, bearing and raising children, housework and doing waged work. The message was that what women did was undervalued and the way to highlight this was to stop doing it for one day.

This public presentation of the issues focussed on the situation of society and women's place in it. There was no emphasis in the promotional material of matters which might have been perceived as more controversial and potentially divisive, such as abortion, contraception or violence against women. It was women and their work, both domestic and waged, which was made highly visible. They came together, and factories, offices and homes were emptied of women.

Commenting on the possibility of female solidarity in capitalist society, Bujra wrote:

"My argument is, then, that in the capitalist mode of production a common position as domestic labourers is of itself, not a sufficient basis for female solidarity .....Female solidarity only over-rides class divisions in very exceptional circumstances and it may indeed contribute to the perpetuation of those class divisions. In

capitalist society female solidarity may perhaps more realistically be seen as the product of contradictions within classes."

(1978:30)

Many of the exceptional circumstances surrounding The Day Off have been identified in this chapter: the small size of the society, excellent communications network and publicity effort, widespread celebration of International Women's Year, encouragement by the State, carefully modulated statement of aims and past examples of collective action by women.

As examples of the contradictions within classes which may promote solidarity among women, Bujra mentioned i) the masking of the inequality between the domestic worker and income provider and ii) the disadvantages women experience in comparison to men in the labour market because of their dual role as domestic and waged workers (ibid). The effect on women's lives of combining waged and unwaged work has been detailed in chapter four, and it was precisely on this issue that so much of the publicity for The Day Off concentrated. However, it was carefully expressed not in terms of men being privileged but as women being under-valued.

Whatever the differences at the time and since, concerning the point and significance of the Kvennafri, it was two aspects which were always emphasised in the literature and conversations that I had with women concerning the Kvennafri. That it was so good to see and experience such a large gathering of women and that men had to cope without them. Many women talked rather gleefully of husbands, who had stayed at home or taken their children to work, looking exhausted at the end of the day. Steinþórsdóttir reported that some men talked of the long friday "Sumir töluðu um



föstudaginn langa" (op.cit.:47) Föstudagurinn Langi is the Icelandic for Good Friday, but whether there was a conscious association with the crucifixion, I am not sure. The Kvennafri was a massive consciousness raising exercise, for women themselves in that their individual experience was articulated and shown to be in fact not individual but collective, and for men who had a brief taste of having to combine waged work and domestic commitments. So while there was a deliberate avoidance of anti-male statements, a strong point about their relatively privileged position was made.

#### 6.6. Theoretical Considerations and Ethnographic Parallels

In Power: A Radical View, Lukes critically examined what he called the one-dimensional and two-dimensional approaches to the study of power which limit the analysis to observable conflict between interest groups. Lukes maintained that such an assumption is unwarranted and leaves unconsidered whole areas where power may be exercised.

"To put the matter sharply, A. may exercise power over B. by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another to have the desires you want them to have - that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?..... is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things either because they can see or imagine

no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat".

(1974:23-4)

In writing of power in this way Lukes appears to be describing what Gramsci called hegemony; that is the way in which the dominant classes of a society ensure the 'voluntary' accord of the subordinate classes in the value system.

"The hegemony of a political class meant for Gramsci that the class had succeeded in persuading the other classes of society to accept its own moral, political and cultural values. If the ruling class is successful, then this will involve the minimum use of force, as was the case with the successful liberal regimes of the nineteenth centuries"

(Joll, 1977:99)

Williams also made the point that hegemony was successful when it was imperceptible

"Bourgeois society established what he was to call a "hegemony" over the mind and spirit, so total that it was never perceived as such at all. It registered on the mind as "normality"; serfs were no more aware of their serfdom than they were of the force of gravity"

(1978:246)

In analysing the importance of hegemony, Gramsci did not deny the importance of the dominant classes' ownership and control over the productive economic forces in society and the coercive apparatus of the State (1971:12). He stressed that equal attention had to be paid to their

ability to achieve an apparently consensual status quo. Although the scattered references to hegemony in the Prison Notebooks emphasised its world defining nature, the possibility of its denial was noted. First, there are groups in society who do not accept the dominant classes, although subordinated by the latter's control of economic and coercive resources. Second, Gramsci wrote of everyone being a philosopher to the extent that they thought about their experience, which allowed the possibility of the denial of hegemony. Third, in the following passage Gramsci wrote of occasions when hegemony may be denied by a group, which to all appearances seems to accept their subordination and the ordering of society as it is.

"This contrast between thought and action, i.e. the co-existence of two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action, is not simply a product of self-deception (malafede). Self-deception can be an adequate explanation for a few individuals taken separately, or even for a group of a certain size, but it is not adequate when the contrast occurs in the life of the great masses. In these cases the contrast between thought and action cannot but be the expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order. It signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in "normal times" - that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate."

(op.cit.:326-7)

Gramsci foot-noted normal times as being:

"....opposed to the exceptional and hence potentially revolutionary moments in history in which a class or group discovers its objective and subjective unity in action"

(ibid.)

Lukes quoted this passage in support of the notion of the three dimensional view of power which takes account of dissent when this is not manifest in overt, issue-based struggle. He commented:

"While one may not accept Gramsci's attribution of 'its own conception of the world' to a social group, it can be highly instructive (though not conclusive) to observe how people behave in 'abnormal times' - when (ex hypothesi) 'submission and intellectual subordination' are absent or diminished, when the apparatus of power is removed or relaxed"

(op.cit.:47)

Anthropologists have done much to elucidate the structures of society; the distribution of power, resources, organisation of economic, kinship and belief systems. They have also examined 'abnormal times', when through ritual or other means, structure is displayed, commented upon and may be subverted. Turner has elaborated the ideas in Van Gennep's Rites of Passage (1960) into a model of a dialectical process present in all societies: that is the dynamic interchange between structure and anti-structure.

"From all this I infer, that, for individuals and groups social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experiences of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality.

(1974:83)

Turner paid special attention to the liminal phase

of rites when there is an appearance of the rules and structures of society being denied, but contains embedded within it the lessons of structure. As La Fontaine (1972) showed, the degree of elaboration of rites may reflect the structures of society. On the other hand, Ardener (1972; 1975) analysed women's rituals to demonstrate the existence of an alternative but "muted" (Hardman, 1973) world view.

In his first article Ardener aimed to explore the reasons why women are under-represented in the anthropological literature. He suggested that a contributory reason was that women did not speak in a way that researchers found amenable to record and analyse. He came close to suggesting that women are in fact inarticulate.

"Ethnographers report that women cannot be reached so easily as men: they giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic and the like."

(1972:137)

Ardener has been criticised for over-generalising and positing what comes close to being a biological determinist argument (Mathieu, 1977); a charge which he specifically denied (1975:24). He sought to establish that women were muted rather than mute.

"One of the problems that women presented was that they were rendered 'inarticulate' by the male structures; that the dominant structure was articulated in the terms of a male world-position. Those who were not in the male world-position, were, as it were 'muted'."

(ibid.:21-2)

This concept seems to be very close to Gramsci's idea of hegemony, although Ardener makes no reference to Gramsci. In identifying expression of the muted perspectives in

Bakweri women's rituals, Ardener focussed on the times when a group is acting as an organic totality, which Gramsci again specified.

Turner also identified people who have a permanently anti-structural position within society - who have a licence to comment upon authority; and those movements which at their inception, display all the characteristics of what he called *communitas*: lack of differentiation, egalitarianism and the denial of rules of dress, behaviour and relationships which are present in ordered society. Such movements challenge society as it is and propose a new vision. These analyses seem to answer Lukes' question as to whether a social group can have its own conception of the world. They emphasise the dialectical relationship between anti-structure and structure and that an alternative world view may only be expressed partially and episodically.

Okely (1975) and Ifeka-Moller (1975) have written specifically on the issue of identifying an alternative women's philosophy (to use the term in Gramsci's way). Both demonstrated that in certain ways, women in the cultures which they studied, denied the hegemonic male-dominated values. They differed in that Okely considered normal times, that is the women's perspective which could be identified as an undercurrent in everyday Traveller life. Ifeka-Moller on the other hand, analysed an abnormal time when women rose in rebellion against what they saw as an infringement on their areas of control.

From 1880 to 1975 Igbo women's economic activities expanded but formal, male control over land and labour and the cosmology concerning the proper male and female spheres did not alter. This growing contradiction between women's ex-

perience and their idealised placed in society was internalised by the women and expressed as a fear of infertility. The "Women's War" was triggered when the colonial authorities proposed to tax women "like men" as they perceived it. This collective action happened, not quite as Lukes thought, when controls were relaxed or diminished, but as the climax of a long period of growing contradictions. Controls had loosened to the extent of enabling women to take advantage of their economic opportunities but alternative control was being imposed by the outside colonial powers (ibid.:145).

In neither of these cases were women acting politically in the narrow sense. They were not taking part in a conscious revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow male dominance. The Gypsy women's position was alleviated, and the Igbo women were expressing their control over certain areas in society - not seeking to overthrow the order as a totality. This is not to deny the significance of these "flashes" of an alternative conception of the world. They may, in particular circumstances, be a basis for developing and articulating an explicit consciousness of subordination, which is vital if any action to change that situation is to take place

Turner considered movements which had this element of revolutionary intent, mentioning in particular millenarian movements which have been more fully discussed by Burridge. Burridge considered that millenarian activities take place in times of social change, when the perceived reality of life does not harmonise with people's feelings and there is a need for what he called a new and more satisfactory redemptive process (1969:6). There is a questioning of old assumptions and the distribution of power and economic control.

".....millenarian movements involve the adoption of new assumptions, a new redemptive process, a new politics - economic framework, a new mode of measuring the man, a new integrity, a new community: in short, a new man."

(ibid:13)

Throughout his analysis Burridge emphasised that millenarian movements concern power:

"We are discussing assumptions about power which, whether or not investigator or people think of them as pertaining to spiritual beings, predicate or entail a particular redemptive process."

(ibid)

It is significant that Burridge considers the role of women prophets in the section entitled money. In discussing the role of prophets in articulating the view of people debarred from full participation in the redemptive process, he wrote:

"Female prophets are usefully appreciated in this light. For besides being prophets in the ordinary sense they also participate in an an infrastructure of competition and privilege, that of men versus women in a world where men are privileged. Given this particular kind of competitive ambience, the relevant point of contact - through which we are enabled to recognise the existence of competing moral systems - lies in our ability to distinguish different ways of measuring the man, different kinds of redemptive process. In this the presence or absence of money is vital. Money goes along with particular moral and social relations.

Making a radical distinction between social orders which use money as a basic measure of man, and those which do not, is crucial."

(ibid:41-2)



Burridge developed his analysis through the study of cultures experiencing the recent introduction of money, but it can be fruitfully applied to a society like Iceland where money has been in circulation for centuries. This is because in that country, as in others with a developed economy, there are areas of life where it is thought inappropriate for money, and the particular quantitative form of assessment it engenders, to intrude. A description has already been given in chapter three of the historical process by which the Icelandic home has lost its function as a centre of production and came to be the refuge from the outside world. It is a sphere where money does not function as the major criterion for the measurement of worth. It does take money to run a home but the atmosphere or quality of this sphere is not solely attributable to money spent, nor is the work paid for with a wage. It is not that home and work are in fact wholly separated spheres, but rather that they are perceived to be so, and the measures of worth are opposed. Successful participation in waged work is largely measured by money, but this is not true of running a home.

Today in Iceland women, to greater extent than men have to be successful in both these spheres where the assessment of worth is so different. In this context, fish-factory table work where women are pressurised by the bonus system every minute of the working day, must be the acme of the quantitative money-based assessment of worth. Women also have the major role in running the home. This is the double load of women - or rather the triple load in the Rauðsokkar view: housekeeping and childraising, waged work and taking an active part in community life. That women have to succeed in all these areas was encapsulated in the comment/judgement

made of a woman in Fróneyri who had been widowed for many years.

"She had a hard working life, bringing up up those children alone and she worked hard in the fish-factory but she never neglected her home. It was always beautiful."

As a widow this woman was seen as having an especially hard struggle but all women, with partners or without, have to juggle the demands made of them by home and waged work. Burridge's words on one of the factors which may lead to consciousness of contradiction and action to change this are very apt:

"competing prestige systems, characterised either by a common involvement in the self-same assumptions together with a relatively privileged access to the rewards and benefits of the assumptions on the one hand, and a relatively under-privileged access on the other; or by the inherent opposition contained in qualitative and quantitative measures of man."

(ibid:48)

This can be read as an elegant summation of the position of women in industrial society.

To sum up the preceding themes from Lukes, Gramsci, Ardener, Okely, Ifeka-Moller, Turner and Burridge. It is argued that it is possible to identify the presence of a subordinated world view or philosophy among a social group. This may not be articulated in a cohesive theoretical way, nor presented as 'political' issues nor worked out in overt conflict. Such a world view is not a wholly autonomous entity belonging to the subordinated group; it is formed in a dialectical process with the dominant groups. Owing to this the researcher may have to seek out the expression of such a world view in the interstices of everyday life - "the

crevices of verbalised activities" (Okely, op.cit.:70), or during anti-structural events that only happen sporadically. Further, even if such alternative flashes of perception do exist, they do not necessarily present a direct challenge to the existing power system. An alternative perception may be a means for ameliorating subordination or having periodic events which act as a temporary safety valve (Gluckman, 1963:46-7) which do not challenge the fundamental structures of economic, juridical and political power nor resolve contradictions. On the other hand, such alternative world views may be a basis, especially when articulated by prophets (Burridge) or organic philosophers (Gramsci), for direct action.

#### 6.7. The Housewife's Holiday

In 1978 I participated in an event which can be seen to have an anti-structural character. It was the kind of situation where it has been suggested, it is possible to find the glimpses of an alternative world view. In 1960 after pressure from various women's organisations, a law was passed providing funds to finance holidays for housewives (húsmæðra-orlof). These are organised on a group basis and held during the summer months in boarding schools.

The one I went on lasted a week and there were 73 women, some from Reykjavík, others from the northern region. Conspicuous in their absence were young women; all apart from myself, were middle aged to elderly. There are several reasons why this was so. Women with young children find it difficult to arrange childcare to take advantage of the holidays. The organisation is aware of this problem and does arrange

some holidays where women bring their children - although this rather defeats the object of giving women a complete break. Also in comparison to the 1960s, Icelanders go abroad for their holidays much more today. Finally, the housewife's holiday movement does have something of an old-fashioned image. It tends to be seen as something for older women. My contemporaries were rather surprised that I had gone on one.

What happened during the week was very much the inverse of women's everyday experience. We were all together rather than being separated in our houses, had our meals provided rather than having to cook them, there were organised trips and evening entertainments and rules such as no smoking in the bedrooms unless all agreed, no noise after 11.30 pm and no solitary walks. Women with years of experience of being carers, organisers, arrangers and rule makers were being cared for, arranged and organised. For me the atmosphere was reminiscent of that on school study trips - there was a degree of licence but still some control and organisation. The meals, outings and evening entertainments provided the parameters of the day but the rest of the time we spent as we pleased: reading, talking, playing cards and sunbathing. There were of course few men around, just the chef, and I noticed that there was very little mention of husbands and children. I had anticipated that there would be a lot of talk of families and showing of photographs but in fact there was not. Similarly, I saw that women did not do hand-work. It was very much a case of leaving the family and home-based activities behind.

The atmosphere was very relaxed. We were referred to, and referred to ourselves as stelpur (girls) not konur (wo-

men). I wrote in my diary "we are all girls here". Most of the women sunbathed in their bras or topless. There were many statements about how well women could enjoy themselves together like this in a group, unlike men and without alcohol. To me directly it was asserted that here all women got on well together, whereas in England there were huge divides between rich and poor. A comradely feeling among women was emphasised.

We were divided into those from the south and those from the north to put on two of the evening entertainments (kvöldvaka). We arranged a mixture of poems, songs, plays, funny anecdotes based on personal experience and talks. (As an honorary representative of the northern region, I was asked to speak on life in England). The northern region's plays focussed on men and their foibles. In the first an old man was telling a doctor (played as a man) that he was dying. After about five minutes of reciting his symptoms, the patient had convinced the doctor, and himself, of his imminent demise. Then a 'young sexy girl' entered the sick-room and the 'dying man' perked up and started chasing her around the room. The Lost Hat was the title of the second play and it had two characters, a husband and wife. The man was looking for his hat, getting more and more abusive as he accused his wife of mislaying it. She literally could not get a word in edgewise because he interrupted her with more invective everytime she tried to speak. She wanted to tell him that the hat was on his head; which he only discovered when it fell off his head.

The women from the south put on a skit and a play which were about women themselves. The first was about the early housewife's holidays, when they were rather more earnestly

organised. A group of women were doing 'morning exercises', but they had dressed back to front and wore masks on the back of their heads. The effect as they went through the routine of arms bend etc. was bizarre and extremely funny. The play they put on had an overdressed woman interviewing, for the post of housekeeper, a rather vacant young woman (quite shrewdly observed as chewing gum and pulling it out to twist it, which was a habit of many teenage girls I knew). As the interview proceeded it became apparent that the young woman had no idea of how to cook and run a home and was reluctant to do so anyway, in case she spoilt her nails.

I did not attend the kvöldvaka on the final evening because I had to leave early. I was told that the highlight of the evening was a mock wedding. The 'bride' was the tallest woman on the holiday (well over six feet and rather majestic); the 'groom' was a tiny elderly woman.

These holidays were initiated specifically to provide a break for the people in society who receive no wages for their work, as was said when we were welcomed on the first night. During the week the women experienced almost a complete reversal of their normal lives. They were looked after and served, freed from the demands of husbands and children. Some direct statements, and the more implicit ones in the various entertainments, emphasised their common identity and distanced them from men and some other women. A few there were involved in feminist organisations, others explicitly stated that they were not feminists "ég er ekki Rauðsökkar" (I am not a feminist). The interview play showed how these women marked themselves off from a housewife who was unable to cope with housekeeping alone, and a young woman who had no idea how to do it. On the whole these were non-radical

women, firmly established in their marriages and role as housewives. Yet they mocked the foibles of men in the plays and the week culminated in, what I was told was, an hilarious version of a wedding, the rite of passage they had all gone through - the start of the marital relationship to which they returned the next day.

This week, when women stepped outside of the routine of everyday life, had many of the characteristics of anti-structure identified by Turner. We were not the wives or mothers of anyone, but women (or girls) together, having left behind the roles occupied in everyday life. It was an abnormal time when elements of normal life were reversed: leisure replaced work, the carers were cared for and in the ritual of the evening entertainments there were images of reversal and the relationship between women and men was commented upon.

There was no consciously feminist view being expressed, the interview play certainly indicated a lack of solidarity with some women. As Bujra noted, manifestations of female solidarity do not necessarily entail a feminist consciousness (op.cit.:14-5). In this particular instance there appeared to be a celebration of the women's own competence in their domestic role, achieved through ridiculing someone who was unfit to run a home. However, the general tenor of the holiday was of women having a good time together, laughing at themselves - and in direct and indirect ways expressing their views on men and their relationships with them.

#### 6.7.1. Relevance to the Kvænnafrídagur

It was precisely non-feminist women who had to be

engaged if the organisers of The Day Off were to attain their goal of mass participation. Quite clearly there were multiple factors which were instrumental in ensuring the overwhelming response. Among the most important was that the message was aimed at all women: housewives, factory workers, farmers' wives and white-collar workers. An appeal was made to women's common experience as wage earners, childcarers and housewives. Great care was taken to promote The Day Off not as an attack on men, but as a demonstration/celebration of women's contribution to society. An appeal was made for justice, which had considerable resonance in a society, which although stratified in terms of class, has a very strong egalitarian ethos.

On the basis of the housewife's holiday, I would argue that there was also a reserve of solidarity among women which could be appealed to. The messages given during the holiday were somewhat veiled, being expressed as jokes. They were also invisible to the wider society because presented in a private context - amongst women themselves. During the Kvennafrídagur itself, an anti-structural event on a large scale, the messages were explicit and addressed to men as well as women. Women quite simply left off doing what they normally do - refused to cope with their triple role and showed just how important a part they had in Icelandic society. It was an example of women acting as a class for themselves, if only for a brief period.

Whether this was enough, if The Day Off was a success, was variously interpreted. For some it succeeded in its own terms by achieving a mass response. For others, especially the members of the Redstockings Movement, this very aim was a failure. Some Rauðsokkar were disappointed to the extent



of not really wanting to talk to me about it. Others did speak of the feeling at the time and the importance of getting so many women together. One woman mentioned one thing which she saw as a result of The Day Off:

"At least the right-wing began to take notice of us after that, for instance Morgunblaðið (a newspaper) wrote about us."

Achievements which resulted from Kvennafrídagur are virtually impossible to identify. It was not set up as a demonstration in support of very specific aims; unlike for instance, the demonstrations concerning the establishment of the gynaecological department or against the closure of the specialist milk shops in 1976 (see section 8.8.2.). Apart from achieving the participation of the majority of Icelandic women, the evaluation of The Day Off did not depend on the realisation of any one goal and this may be the key to the significance which may be attributed to it over time.

It cannot be ignored or forgotten because it was a huge demonstration and unique in national and international terms. In the history of the women's movement in Iceland it does have an important place but its meaning is open to re-evaluation and interpretation through time. Significance is being attributed to the Kvennafrídagur retrospectively. As the figure overleaf shows, it is already being associated iconically with two later events: the passing of the equal rights law of 1976 and the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as President in 1980. There is an implication that these things would not have taken place without The Day Off. It can be inferred that more events will be traced back to this bench-mark.



Figure xix Leaflet Given Out On The Election Of  
Vigdís Finnbogadóttir

(The text reads: Women's Day Off 1975, Equality  
Law 1976, Women President 1980)

BECOMING VISIBLE

## CHAPTER SEVEN - WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

### 7.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter a recent example of collective action by Icelandic women was described and analysed. It was argued that as well as the existing organisational network which facilitated communication, there was a feeling of collective identity among Icelandic women which was a factor in the mass response to The Day Off (1975). Here, some of the women's organisations are considered to support further this contention. The organisations and campaigns they have conducted have both drawn upon and strengthened a feeling of identity among women.

In 1976 Sigurðardóttir estimated there to be some 500 organisations in the country which were composed solely, or had a majority, of women. They included occupational associations such as Ljósmaðrafélag Íslands (The Icelandic Midwives Union) and Hjúkrunarfélag Íslands (The Icelandic Nurses Union), women's sections of political parties and organisations such as the Red Cross, the umbrella society Kvenfélagasamband Íslands (Congress of Women's Societies) which had 246 societies or over 23,000 affiliated members and others such as Kvenréttindafélags Íslands (Women's Rights Association of Iceland) and Rauðsokkahrevfingin (The Redstockings Movement) specifically concerned with feminism (1976a:1-12).

In this chapter only some of this multitude of organisations and campaigns they have taken part in will be considered: women's societies, the campaign for suffrage and women's rights, women's trades unions and employment legislation. It is shown that the types of women's organisations

have changed with the development of Icelandic society. The earliest societies were locally based groups of women which promoted self-help, education and community action. Out of such organisations grew the national suffrage movement at the end of the last century. With the growth of the industrialised economy, women's trades unions developed, particularly in the fishing industry and there was action, including the holding of strikes, to improve employment conditions. Legislation was introduced throughout this century formally extending women's rights in other spheres. A renewal of the questioning of women's position in society, the acknowledgement that legislation is insufficient to end women's subordination, came in the 1970s with the growth of the Redstockings Movement.

## 7.2. Women's Societies

The first women's society (kvenfélag) was founded by 19 women on the 9th July 1869 in Ripurhreppur in the Skagafjörður area of northern Iceland. The records of the agenda for the society's first three years show that the women mainly dealt with issues that pertained to their work in the home and on the farms: hygiene, poverty, teaching children reading, writing and farmwork, promoting the establishment of vegetable gardens. They also discussed providing looms in homes without them and teaching women to weave "so men can go to sea as in the past", and "defending the Icelandic nationality" by for instance, not giving children non-Icelandic names. They established a fund to buy appliances and bought a knitting machine. The society founded a girls school (Kvennafélag Samtök Skagfirzka Kvenna 100 ára, 1969: 3-6).

A similar society was formed in 1874 by eight women in Svínadalur. The first two paragraphs of the 19 paragraph constitution stated that the aim was to improve the women's skills in areas such as reading, writing, cleanliness, house-keeping, childraising, woolwork, weaving, sewing, dairywork and cooking. The society was instrumental in getting knitting and sewing machines imported into the area. When the society lost its role, with the establishment of a housewives school<sup>1</sup> in the area, its funds were given for a scholarship for the education of girls in the commune (Briem, 1926: 46-51).

That both these societies made efforts to get sewing machines is significant. It is probably difficult for us to understand the value of them, one of the first appliances to make an impact on women's lives. One woman told me that her grandmother, having bought her precious machine in Reykjavík, walked all the way to her home in northern Iceland, carrying it. Sewing machines made home sewing more efficient and opened up a new area of waged work for seamstresses.

A particular type of society was formed in the northern area of Keldhverfing in the 1880s: a cow insurance association. Twelve women were founder members and at its height the membership was 20. The women insured their cows for a certain sum and if the cow died because of disease or accident could draw upon the funds in compensation. Loans to buy cows could also be made (Sigurðardóttir, 1923: 18-19).

Self-help and improvement societies of this type proliferated throughout Iceland. In Vestfirðir a number were founded in the first decades of this century. Most had

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1. In this century several housewives schools were established. They numbered eleven in the 1970s and provided one or two year courses for girls who had left school. The range of subjects offered had expanded by the 1970s but the emphasis was still on housekeeping skills.

an educational and social purpose. Some were set up as charitable organisations to relieve poverty, establish childrens homes, housewives schools or support medical services. One ran a guest house for a number of years, while another established in 1912, planned to help the poor, promote knowledge of women's rights issues, obtain a priest to give services in the parish and contribute to the church building fund.

The Kvenfélag in Fróneyri came into being before the war. One women said she had reservations about it because of its 'good works' image. The first chairwomen had been a member of the wealthiest family in the village and this was also not liked by some of the women at the time. The society did flourish and was active in getting the village hall built during the 1930s. When I lived in Fróneyri there was some discussion about the society because it met in the fish-factory canteen. The older women who remembered the struggles they had had against the factory in past years, felt that it would be more appropriate if they met in their "own place" -the village hall. In addition a couple of men had joined the society, on the basis that the equality law of 1976 opened all societies to both sexes. Again it was the older women who felt ambivalent about this change, but all agreed that the society had got a new lease of life with younger women joining. The society did work such as painting the school and cleaning up the graveyard after the snow melted in spring. Shopping trips and visits abroad were arranged and the society put on the "Christmas tree celebration" for the children.

The first society formed in Reykjavík was a good works rather than self-help organisation. In the 70th anniversary

book given out by Thorvaldsensfélagið, it was recorded that it was founded in 1875 to help the sort of women who toiled all day on the wharves carrying loads of salt and coal into the warehouses, receiving a third less pay than the men. The society established a school in the 1880s to give these women an education in the hope that they could get better work. The school was not a success, probably because such women had no time to attend it. A practical way in which the society helped working women was by rebuilding a wash-house and presenting it to the city. Washing was an alternative type of manual labour to fish and dock work, but equally arduous. (A women in Fróneyri said that "you knew something was wrong" if a women started taking in washing). It was done in Reykjavík at the hot springs, in the open air. In 1906 the society started a fund, financed by holding bazaars and selling decorative stamps at Christmas, to help poor children (Thorvaldsensfélagið: 1946; 19. Júní: 20.2.1919).

On 26th January 1894 a public meeting was held in Reykjavík to discuss the setting up of a university in Iceland for which the Alþing had voted the previous year. Some 200 women were present at the meeting and it was decided that their role should be to raise money for the university. An 18 women committee was elected to organise a tombola. This was the start of the Icelandic Women's Association (Hið Íslenzka Kvenfélag). The constitution of the society made clear that it aimed to go beyond the usual fund-raising role ascribed to it. Its primary purpose was to support the education and rights of women, take part in the issues of concern in the society and contact women throughout the country to raise funds for the university.

The society started a publication that year which had



a piece about the university, and a translation of an article by Isabell Somerset on the rights of women. Later they published a translation of John Stuart Mills' The Subjection of Women (1869). Like the Thorvaldsensfélag the society attempted to do some practical things to help poor women in Reykjavík. They started a carrier service to the hot springs area so that washerwomen would not have to carry such heavy burdens, and promoted the sale of Icelandic handwork to foreign travellers. Neither of these schemes were entirely successful. The year 1896 was a particularly bad one for earthquakes in the south of Iceland so they established a relief fund for those who had suffered from the effects. Charities for poor pregnant, and old working women were also set up.

The society took part in the suffrage movement by lobbying members of parliament and organising petitions in 1895 and 1907 (the latter in conjunction with the Women's Rights Association of Iceland). About 13,000 signatures were collected in 1907, this in a country with poor communications and a total population of about 80,000. (Not, as Evans wrote less than 50,000 but as he noted it was still a remarkable effort especially when compared with the 600 signatures collected in Italy in the same year). The women's part in establishing the university ensured that women had equal rights to study there and in 1916 the society endowed a scholarship for women students to study at home and carry out postgraduate work abroad (Bjarnason, 1919:65-68 and 75-77; Evans, 1977: 90 and 136).

Hið Íslenska Kvenfélag epitomises the sort of women's societies which were to spring up in Iceland at the end of the last century. They combined self-help, good works,

educational and feminist activities. The next section looks more specifically at the suffrage movement and establishment of other women's rights in Iceland.

### 7.3. Feminism and Nationalism

The second half of the nineteenth century was the period of Iceland's struggle for independence from Denmark. Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, daughter of Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, the founder of the Women's Rights Association, recorded the intimate connection between the nationalist and feminist movements.

"The Women's Movement in Iceland was inspired by the national awakening of the nation. It grew side by side with the struggle for independence and almost at the same time Iceland and her daughters became free."

(1929:11)

Evans wrote of this association in Iceland and some other countries, notably Finland and Norway.

"The dominant political movement among the middle classes was therefore nationalism, the struggle for national self-determination and freedom from foreign control. Nationalism was above all the political ideology of professional, administrative and intellectual classes, but it also had an economic significance. More important for the history of feminism, the ideology of nationalism was rooted in the concept of the sovereignty of the people, which implied parliamentary sovereignty and the extension of the franchise."

(op.cit.:81)

Unlike Britain, where female suffrage was seen by some to endanger the extension of voting rights to more men (ibid:66)

the issue of women's votes was not seen this way in Iceland. It became part of the nationalist struggle.

The Alþing had been restored in 1845 as a consultative assembly and was given some legislative power in 1874. However, executive power still rested with the Danish government and there was a royal veto over legislation. Laws had been passed which extended some women's rights; for instance the 1850 equal inheritance law, and in 1882, widows and single women of independent means aged 25 and over, got the vote in certain local elections. The first women known to use this right was Andrea Guðmundsdóttir in 1884 : (Sigurðardóttir, 1976b:2). (She was a seamstress, which underlines the way in which the invention of sewing machines allowed some women to make an independent living). In 1886 this voting right was extended to cover the election of clergymen. However, in 1893 a bill passed by the Alþing to allow women to stand in local elections was vetoed by the King and he did this several times before the law was finally ratified in 1902. A similar sequence of events happened in 1913 after the vote in favour of full female suffrage. The refusal by the Danes to ratify the Alþing's votes underlined Iceland's subordinate status and the nationalist and feminist causes became inextricably linked.

Some of the earliest public statements on women's rights came from men who supported the nationalist cause. In 1885 the editor of the newspaper Fjallkonan, Valdimar Ásmundsson, wrote an article entitled Kvenfrelsi (Women's Freedom). (The Fjallkona, literally the mountain women, is a symbol of the Icelandic nation). Valdimar called for the enfranchisement of women and put great emphasis on their waged work role.

"Working women are paid no more than a third or fourth of what working men receive, and its easy to demonstrate that, how unjust it is. Although a working women does the same work, as much as a working man, she is paid less than half. Nowhere in the country are women so meanly treated as in Reykjavík. Dock work<sup>2</sup> is truly slavery. There, women do the greatest drudgery with only the strongest of men and although they carry the same loads all day as the men or carry barrow-loads with the men, and in every way do equal work with them, those who pay them are such rascals that they pay the women half what the men get."

(Fjallkonan:7.1.1885)

In the same year Páll Briem, the deputy governor of Iceland spoke to the Thorvaldsensfélag on women's freedom and education and in 1886, Skúli Thoroddsen started a newspaper called Þjóðviljinn which took a nationalistic and feminist line. Skúli, a member of parliament, was one of the sponsors of the 1893 bill which sought to allow women the right to stand in local elections, and the 1899 act giving married women control over their earnings and property.

Newspapers were the most effective means of communication in the country at this time and two women's newspapers were started in 1895. In Reykjavík Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir founded Kvennablaðið (The Women's Paper) and Sigríður Þorsteinsdóttir and Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir began Framsókn (Progress) in the east coast town of Seyðisfjörður.

Bríet had started campaigning for women's rights a decade earlier. Her article in Fjallkonan on 5.6.1885 was the first newspaper article in Iceland written by a women, and in 1887 she gave her first public lecture. She travelled to Scandinavia in 1904 and the suffrage societies she saw there encouraged her to set one up in Iceland. In 1906 Bríet

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2. The Icelandic is "Eyrarvinnan, sem svo er kölluð". Literally Eyrarvinna means soundwork i.e. work done on the docks.

was a guest at the Congress of the International Women Suffrage Alliance in Copenhagen. This was the radical international organisation of women, set up as a break-away group from the International Council of Women (Evans, op.cit. 251). It was lead by Carrie Chapman Catt the American feminist with whom Bríet had corresponded. On her return to Iceland Bríet wrote about the Congress in Kvennablaðið and she and some other women approached Hið Íslenzka Kvenfélag about campaigning more for women's suffrage. But according to a memoire by Bríet, the chairwomen Katrín Magnúsdóttir did not wish to do so because that society had increased its membership once it had become less political. So Bríet and 16 other women established Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (The Women's Rights Association of Iceland, Hereafter referred to as K.R.F.Í.).

They wrote to all women who paid municipal taxes and others they thought interested, to come to a public meeting at which the constitution was worked out. After stating the the name of the society, the second article specified that its aims were :

- "a. to work to ensure that Icelandic women get full political rights, equal with men: to vote and eligibility to stand, also rights to public offices and employment, on the same terms as men.
- b. to increase the knowledge and promote the interest of Icelandic women in these issues, by way of meetings, lectures and newspaper articles.
- c. to enhance the unity and co-operation between Icelandic women by founding branches throughout the country which will all work to the same purpose, adhering to the same rules and in alliance with the main branch in Reykjavík."

In November 1907, married women in Reykjavík had gained

the right to be candidates in the municipal elections and just a few weeks later in January 1908, the K.R.F.Í. put up four women in the election. They canvassed all the thousand or so women eligible to vote and as a result all four women were elected. These councillors served for a number of years and worked especially to improve facilities and services for children: establishing free school meals, a school medical service and playgrounds. Later in the same year Bríet toured the country and established five new branches of the association with 400 members (Bjarnhéðinsdóttir 1947:11-20; Evans, op.cit.:19 and 213; Valdimarsdóttir, op.cit.:6-8).

The K.R.F.Í. continued to campaign for full suffrage and in 1915 the new constitution which granted Iceland home rule in union with Denmark (full independence did not come until 1944) gave all women aged 40 and over, political rights. The plan was for the age qualification to fall by one year for the next 15 years, but an amendment to the constitution reduced the age to 25 years, equal with men, in 1920.

#### 7.4. The Extension and Exercising of Formal Rights

Bríet stood for the Alþing in 1916 but was not elected. Ingibjörg Bjarnason, headmistress of the girls school in Reykjavík, became the first woman member of parliament when elected in 1922. She ran as a candidate independent of a political party on a women's list<sup>3</sup> but joined a party on entering parliament, which according to Valdimarsdóttir

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3. Iceland uses the party list system of proportional representation.

(op.cit.:8) displeased many of the women who had campaigned for her. Subsequently women's lists fell into disfavour and women were a very small minority in local government and the Alþing. There were often no, or only two or three women members of parliament in later years. The first women minister was only appointed in 1970.

In 1977 the K.R.F.Í. wrote to all political parties in Iceland pointing out that as only 3.7% of local councillors and 5% of M.P.s were women, Iceland had the worst record in western Europe apart from Greece and Turkey (Stjórn K.R.F.Í., 1978:61). An improvement in this situation only came with the revival of women's lists in the 1980s. In the local elections of 1982 there was a general swing to the right, but in Akureyri and Reykjavík feminists on women's lists got 10% of the vote and two were elected to each council. The other parties reacted to the women's lists by putting women higher up their own lists and as a result the percentage of women elected doubled from 6% to 12% (Guardian:24.5.1982; Vera, 1982 no. 1:2). The following year women's lists were fielded in three constituencies during the general election (Samtök um Kvinnalista, 1983). Again this meant that other parties put women higher up their lists, so as well as three women from the women's list, six other women were elected, giving the largest number of women ever in the Alþing (Vera, 1983 no. 3:25).

In contrast to organisations in many other countries which tended to decline after the vote had been attained, in the early part of this century, the K.R.F.Í. continued to be active in Iceland. To mark the day women got the vote the association started a fund to build a national hospital, which was completed in 1930. It did other fund

raising work such as establishing a charity to help the widows and orphans of fishermen who drowned when four trawlers went down between 1926 and 1928 (Sigurðardóttir, 1976a) and endowed scholarships for women students.

Alongside other women's societies the K.R.F.Í. promoted and was consulted about proposed legislation which pertained to women and the family. This meant that in Iceland many pieces of legislation were passed in advance of other countries, formally extending women's rights. In 1917 the family law established equal guardianship over legitimate children. A woman was sole guardian of an illegitimate child although both parents had to contribute to its maintenance. In 1921 such children gained the same inheritance rights as legitimate children, if their paternity was acknowledged or proven. Laws on matrimony and the family in 1921 and 1923 established that a married woman remained an independent person in the legal sense, and incorporated the concept of the separate administration of property within marriage and its equal division upon divorce (Anrep 1961). As a result of an initiative by the K.R.F.Í., the women M.P. introduced a bill allowing Icelandic women residing in Iceland but married to foreigners, to keep their citizenship. Prior to this they automatically lost their nationality. A law allowing women to keep their citizenship wherever they resided, was not passed until 1952.

A bill making available to married women information on contraception was passed in 1935. This act also legalised abortion if there was danger to the pregnant woman's health or if she lived in poor social conditions. In 1938 another law allowed abortion if the child was expected to be disabled



(Sigurðardóttir, 1976c:3). The fact that this act also made provision for castration of the mentally disabled suggests that it was partly inspired by the eugenic philosophy prevalent at the time. During the 1970s the introduction of abortion on demand was discussed but the revised act of 1974 still had qualifications and restrictions. When I was in Iceland it was easiest for educated middle class women in Reykjavík to get abortions. The law required that a doctor approve the woman's request for an abortion, and this was easiest to get in Reykjavík, which had by far the greatest number of doctors. If a woman in another area did not have the agreement of her local doctors she had to make the journey to Reykjavík. A particular attitude towards abortion in Iceland resulted from the lack of stigma in having illegitimate children. Women I talked to considered that in general there was much greater moral disapproval of abortion than having an illegitimate child. The argument was that as it was 'easy' to have such a child in Iceland, the woman was doing something wrong in having an abortion. I was told that having an abortion in Reykjavík or a 'd and c' in the local hospital, were strategies used by women who wanted to avoid the censure of their community.

Not all proposed legislation on women's rights was successful. In 1949 Hannibal Valdimarsson introduced a bill which would have consolidated previous laws on equal political, educational, employment and matrimonial rights but it was not passed (Þórleifsdóttir, 1949:12). On the other hand in 1952 and 1960 laws were passed providing home helps when a housewife was sick and holidays for housewives. After the war the K.R.F.Í. was a forum for the discussion of issues

that affected women in society. Many other societies were affiliated to it and so an effective lobby of women was maintained. The 1948 agenda of the national congress of the K.R.F.Í. recorded that 80 delegates were present. As well as representatives of the K.R.F.Í. there were women from 18 organisations in Reykjavík and 33 from other parts of the country. They included women's societies, unions and women's sections of political parties (7. Landsfundar K.R.F.Í. 20.6. 1948). The association started to bring out its magazine, 19. Júní as a annual publication in 1951, and it was sent to all parts of Iceland. In Fróneyri in the 1970s the sale of the magazine was organised by the women's society.

During the 1960s the K.R.F.Í. met regularly in Reykjavík and records of these meetings held in the Library of the History of Icelandic Women, show that they discussed issues such as equal pay, single parents, the provision of kindergartens, care of the elderly, screening for cervical cancer, education and the lack of women representatives on public bodies. They had two programmes a year on the national radio which they used to raise issues about women's position in contemporary society and discuss women's contribution to Icelandic history. In 1968 at the beginning of the renaissance of feminism, the first public debate about the relationship of the sexes in Icelandic society was held on Iceland radio and two members of the K.R.F.Í. took part. At the behest of the International Alliance of Women, the association formed a youth branch called Úur in 1967. Members of Úur carried out research on the pay and status of women bank employees, issued a report on children's books (Barna- og Unglingabækur, 1971) and campaigned on State aid for

kindergartens and the abortion act. In 1972 the society admitted men for the first time. Prior to that only individual women or organisations with a commitment to equality for women, could belong.

Despite gaining some new members, the K.R.F.Í. was largely composed of middle aged and older women. One member affectionately referred to them to me as kerlingar (the old ladies). The association had established a place within the social and political processes of Icelandic society, promoting legislation and discussing issues of concern to women. It was perceived by those women in Iceland who were influenced by the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement as being a part of the establishment. It was seen as representing women's viewpoint within the parameters of society as it was: reformist rather than radical in its approach. That the K.R.F.Í. and other established women's societies could be highly effective in this role was shown by the work they did to get a modern gynaecological department built in Reykjavík.

#### 7.5. "The Matter of the Gynaecological Hospital"

In explaining the mass response to The Women's Day Off, it was mentioned that Icelandic women had acted collectively on other occasions, in particular the campaign for a modern gynaecological department (see section 6.5.). The story of that campaign demonstrates the organisational ability of the women's societies in Iceland and their effective use of the mass media and lobbying of parliament.

The issue was first raised by Steinunn Finnbogadóttir

at a meeting in November 1968 of Bandalag Kvenna í Reykjavík (a Reykjavík women's society founded in 1917). The main gynaecological department in the country was in the National Hospital. It had 53 beds, half for childbirth, half for gynaecological illnesses, which was insufficient particularly as there were only 16 beds for cancer cases. The following year Steinunn's speech was printed in Húsfreyjan (the magazine of the Congress of Icelandic Women's Societies) alongside an article about research which showed cervical cancer to be more prevalent in Iceland than the other Nordic countries.

The K.R.F.Í. took up the issue in 1969 by writing to the Alþing and sending all members of parliament a letter proposing the building of a new department. On the 26th March this was discussed in the Alþing and women held a mass meeting there in support. In April there was a newspaper article in one of the national dailies (Morgunblaðið: 9.4.1969) and a television programme was broadcast. On the 8th May the Alþing decided that work would start on the new building in the spring of the next year. A fund was started to help pay for the building with K.R.F.Í. and Bandalag Kvenna í Reykjavík organising the collection in Reykjavík, and the Congress of Icelandic Women's Societies, in the rest of the country. In addition the K.R.F.Í. gave the profits from the sale of their magazine 19. Júní in 1970 to the fund. Steinunn Finnbogadóttir had suggested that all contributions should be tax deductible and imported equipment free of excise duty. This was agreed by the government. In September 1973 the fund gave 8.5 million krónur (about £31,000) to the hospital to buy equipment. It had originally been hoped that the department would

open in 1971-2 but in fact the first part came into use in 1975 and the formal opening was in December 1976.

Although it took some six years to be built, the fact that the Alþing agreed to build the hospital just six months after the matter was originally raised is a testament to the effectiveness of the women's organisations.

#### 7.6. Women's Unions and Employment Legislation

The first women's trade union was formed in 1914 on the initiative of the K.R.F.Í.. One member, Jónína Jónatansdóttir told Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir that the association concerned itself overwhelmingly with the position of educated women and something had to be done for working women. As Ólafsdóttir (1980) showed in her analysis of the 1880 census from Reykjavík, many women had migrated to Reykjavík at the end of the nineteenth century. They left their home districts if unable to support themselves there, to take up the employment opportunities of the capital. They did the dock and fish work described earlier or worked in the homes of the better off.

Ólafsdóttir quoted from the memoirs of a man whose mother moved to Reykjavík to avoid becoming a pauper after her husband was drowned. She did sewing, washing and cleaning. Her wages were usually in the form of food or tickets to be cashed at one of the shops, rather than money (ibid:94).

A meeting was held in June 1914 to discuss forming a union of working women. The union Framsókn was founded by 68 women and Jónína Jónatansdóttir was elected chairwoman. In an article about pay and conditions during that

period, one woman recalled that in the summer of 1912 wages for women doing manual work on the docks were 10 krónur a week or 15 aurar per hour (20 aurar at weekends)<sup>4</sup>. They worked from 6 am to 7 pm. In 1914 immediately after the formation of the union the women negotiated a wage-rise to 17 aurar per hour, 25 aurar at weekends. It was also agreed that they could start work an hour later on very cold mornings and the usual working hours were reduced to 6.30 am to 6.30 pm. By 1916 the union had ensured that women received 80% of the male rate, that is 40 aurar per hour (Verkakvemmafélagið Framsókn 50 ára Afmælisrit, 1964:9 and 67).

As Thompson wrote:

"Fishing is commonly thought of as a man's trade. In fact it is an occupation peculiarly dependent on the work of women"

(1983:167)

As shown in chapter three, women had always been involved in the processing of fish in Iceland, but it was only with the setting up of fish-factories, herring stations and expansion of dock work and women working together in large numbers, rather than being tied servants in farming/fishing households, that unions were founded. As in Britain (Thompson, *ibid*:168-172) strike action by women followed almost immediately.

The union decided to publicise its payscales in other parts of Iceland particularly in the western region. As a result a women's union was formed in Ísafjörður and a mixed union in Bolungavík in 1917. Other women's unions were formed in Akureyri (1915) and Húsavík and Eskifjörður (1918). At a meeting of Framsókn in 1925 it was announced that an alternative women's union called Frantiðin had been set up by 181 women in Hafnafjörður. This displeased the

4. There were 100 aurar to the króna.

secretary of Framsókn who had gone to Hafnafjörður to help unionise the Hafnafjörður women, but the president welcomed the new union and hoped the two would work together. This they did, with other unions in southern Iceland, when the employers attempted to lower wages in the years 1926 and 1927. The women went on strike but despite this their wages were reduced and over the next few decades their wages, as a percentage of men's wages fell below the 80% attained in 1916 (V.K.F. Framsókn, op.cit.:67).

In 1955 a women's conference was organised by the Labour Federation of Iceland (Alþýðusamband Íslands) . (This is a federation of trades unions formed in conjunction with the Labour Party (Alþýðuflokkur) in 1916. Framsókn was one of the original members and Jónína Jónatansdóttir was on the executive). At the conference it was decided that the unions should aim to get equal pay for women and men. As interim goals they would work to ensure that women's wage rates were the same in all parts of the country and not less than 90% of men's wages (Helgadóttir, 1955:26; Nordal and Kristinsson, 1975:154). In fact the wage scales for women in Framsókn did not rise above 80% of the male rate until 1961. Then in accordance with the equal pay legislation of 1962, wages were increased gradually to achieve parity.

Many women doing manual work were in mixed unions and were able to argue the case for equal pay when they did the same work as men. For instance in 1946 after a six week strike the union of netmakers Nót won equal pay for women, giving a 24% wage increase for men and a 62.5% increase for women (Sigurðardóttir, 1976b:5). Others in occupations which were exclusively done by women, formed their own unions:

Freyja - the Washerwomen's Union, the Unions of Midwives and Nurses, Sókn for women who worked in old peoples and childrens homes and hospitals and Félag Afgreiðslustúlkna í Brauð og Mjólkurbúðum for women who were assistants in the specialist milk and bread shops.

Over the years some of these unions lost their raison d' être and others amalgamated with men's unions. The nurses union admitted men once they began to do nursing. New unions composed mainly of women grew up as the country developed, for instance the Air-hostesses Union. In 1973 they struck and succeeded in abolishing the rule that those married and/or with children or aged over 36 were automatically dismissed. (Air-hostesses played a particular part in The Women's Day Off by bringing back literature from abroad which was available at the open-houses where women were invited to go after the mass meeting in Reykjavík).

Today the Icelandic workforce is highly unionised. In 1975 more than 90% of employees belonged to a union (Nordal and Kristinsson, op.cit.:288). The organisation of the labour force only gained momentum in this century and women were extensively involved in this process. Iceland's industrialisation came later than in many other European countries and an indigenous middle class was also slow to develop. The social and economic conditions in the country largely ruled out the spread of a bourgeois concept that women should be protected from waged labour (c.f. Davidoff, 1976:122). Many of those who did belong to the small social and political elite in Iceland at the end of the last century and beginning of this, were involved in the nationalist/feminist struggle and were keenly aware of the role of women



in their society. The exploitation of working women was as much an issue as suffrage itself, during this period.

Broddason and Webb wrote

"There are probably few nations in the world where the beliefs in equality of the individual, and in the equality of opportunity, are as strongly held as in Iceland."

(1975:49)

Although as demonstrated, Iceland is not a classless society, an egalitarian ethos is and has been very widespread in the country. This helps to explain the early legislation which opened up employment opportunities for women and gave some women the right to equal pay and conditions, particularly in white-collar jobs, as that employment sector expanded.

The first law was passed in 1911 and this gave women the right to attend all schools in the country and be employed in public offices on equal terms with men. This law gave women access to the priesthood but in fact no woman was ordained until 1974. Women primary school teachers had received equal pay de facto from 1907 when compulsory primary education was introduced, but this was enshrined in law in 1919. Two years later the widowers of women civil servants got the same pension rights as widows. (A situation which does not apply in many superannuation schemes in this country today.) In 1954 the law giving equal rights and wages to men and women in official positions was renewed and in 1958 Iceland ratified I.L.O. convention no. 100 on equal pay for equal work. The subsequent law of 1962 aimed to achieve this, step by step over five years but only applied to the same work. In

1973 legislation incorporated the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, outlawed sex discrimination by employers and established an Equal Pay Commission (Sigurðardóttir, 1976b: 7-8). Other legislation in the field of social security and to a lesser extent, taxation, sought to equalise the position of women and men. The Icelandic Equality Law of 1976 was a much simpler document than the British legislation of 1975 and did not have the loopholes incorporated into the latter and was therefore considered to be more effective. (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 1976: 51-52). Passing legislation does not, of course, guarantee that in fact women receive equal opportunities in employment and research carried out in the 1970s showed that women were largely in the lower paid jobs in the service sector. (Vilhjálmssdóttir, 1976: 254-258). Chapter four showed the gender-based segregation of work in the fish-factories and the way in which women's work was defined as and paid for as unskilled work.

Whatever the legal position, women's experience of employment is largely shaped by their family responsibilities as was shown in chapter four. Formal equality of opportunity and equal wages have a limited effect in reality if women have the double work load of running the home as well as doing waged work. It was to this issue, the questioning of the structuring of society and the other ways in which women were subordinated in Icelandic society that the Rauðsokkahreyfing drew attention when they started their activities in the 1970s.

CHAPTER EIGHT - RAUÐSOKKAHREYFINGIN8.1. Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis considers the Movement which is the Icelandic representative of the modern feminist movement. It is known as Rauðsokkahreyfingin (The Redstockings Movement) - Rsh. for short. The organisation's origins, structure, campaigns, development and relationships with other groups in Icelandic society will be examined. The data in this chapter is drawn from published material - newspapers and periodicals and the Movement's own literature, and my own participation in meetings during the winters of 1978 and 1979.

8.2. Beginnings

In the preface to Women's Estate, Mitchell wrote:

"By 1970 there was some form of Women's Liberation Movement active in all but three of the liberal democratic countries of the advanced capitalist world. The exceptions are Iceland - an isolated enclave of pseudo-egalitarian capitalism - and Austria and Switzerland, in social terms probably the most traditional and hierarchic of European societies."

(1971:11)

As regards Iceland, Mitchell was only just correct because the Rsh. came into being during the course of 1970.

The background to this was the period of international protest during the 1960s. One woman told me that Iceland had been politically "very quiet" from 1950 to 1970, but like many others she had been aware of the Black and anti-

Vietnam war protests in America, the Events in Paris in 1968 and towards the end of the decade, the start of the Women's Liberation Movement in America and Europe. Some women who were to be founder members of the Rsh. had lived abroad, mainly in Scandinavia, and had been involved in feminist activities there. In May 1970 the Danish Redstockings started their activities, and because of the close cultural links between the two countries, there was a lot of media coverage in Iceland of their action at the time when the Icelandic Rsh. began.<sup>1</sup>

In Iceland itself, precursors of the renewed feminist debate were the publication of two books of short stories about women's lives by Svava Jacobsdóttir in 1965 and 1967 and the translation of Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, chapters from which were published in the periodical of the Association of Icelandic Co-operative Societies and broadcast on the radio. One founder Rauðsokkar wrote her university dissertation on the Icelandic women's rights struggle. (Sigurðardóttir, 1967).

In the published accounts of the origins of the Rsh. the feeling of energy and spontaneity is emphasised: "The Redstockings Movement came like a fresh breeze" (Gísladóttir et.al., Þjóðviljinn:2.9.1978), and the women I talked to expressed this very strongly. However, these women also talked of the background to this, their interest in what was going on in other parts of the world and the growth of their own awareness. During the winter of 1969-70 a group of women who belonged to the same sewing club began to discuss feminist issues instead of sewing (Bjarnadóttir et.al.

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1. A short account of the Danish Redstockings is given by Gerlach-Nielsen, 1980.

Þjóðviljinn:3.5.1980) and one woman told me that she started talking to women with whom she worked and found they had been thinking about the same things. Another woman spoke of the great energy and aggressiveness she and the other women felt: they wanted to express these ideas and to do something but had "hvergi heima" (no home) within the established political parties, women's rights organisations or ultra-left groups.

The events leading to the first public manifestation of what was to become the Rsh. was recounted by the woman who was most centrally involved, Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir described how in mid-April 1970 she was talking to a teacher who had found it impossible to find a place in a crèche for her child. She said to Vilborg, referring to the feminist movement elsewhere: "God, if only something like that could be done here". (Gísladóttir et.al.:op.cit.). Vilborg said she walked home thinking of this and remembered that there had been a production of Lysistrata by Aristophanes in a high school in Reykjavík<sup>2</sup>. She immediately thought of using the statue of Venus from the play; of carrying it in the Union's May Day March that year. She contacted the director of the play, Brynja Benediktsdóttir, to find out if the statue still existed and a group of women, the members of the ex-sewing club forming the nucleus, prepared the statue for the march. A couple of days before the march they built a platform for the Venus statue and planned their action. The figure was draped with a banner which proclaimed: "a human being not a piece of merchandise".

"MANNESKJA EKKI MARKAÐSVARA"

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3. This is the play in which the women of Athens go on strike

Women from the art college made other banners which read: "wake up women" and "women make use of your rights".

The first plan was to have about thirty women involved in the action but later it was decided to invite wide support and an announcement was placed to be read on the radio at midday.

"Konur á rauðum sokkum hittumst  
á Hlemmtorgi klukkan eitt"

(Women in red socks, meet together  
at Hlemmur Square at 1 o'clock)

The significance of the red socks was to show that "we stood on our own feet and were part of a struggle to revolutionise opinion" (Gísladóttir et. al.: *ibid.*).

Many women did respond to this call. One described to me how she was grabbed by another woman while she was on her way to pick up her child from a crèche. "Aren't you going?" asked the other woman. She was wearing red trousers that day and thought that this was why the woman had asked her. The organisers of the Union March had not been directly informed of the women's plans and thought, initially at least, that it was an attack on, or attempt to mock the unions. Eventually the women were allowed to follow on behind the march. Reports in the newspapers about the march all focussed on the women's actions.

### 8.3. Setting Up An Organisation

In her study of the American feminist movement, Freeman noted that movements often have inconspicuous beginnings and there may be difficulty in tracing them later. She proposed that there must be three conditions for a successful movement

to arise, 1) A pre-existing communications network which, if well developed facilitates the rapid spread of the movement, or necessitates a lot of organisational effort if poorly developed. 2) This network will have to be co-optable, amenable to the ideas of the movement. 3) There must be a precipitating crisis or a few individuals promoting an organisation or propagating an idea (1975:48-9).

Freeman showed that in America the network within the "radical community" and Commissions on the Status of Women during the 1960s, were vital to the growth of feminism there. In Iceland no use was made of the pre-existing communications network - the established women's organisations - but I would argue that such a network was not vital, as was the case in America, because of the nature of the society. The population is so small (less than 250,000) and half the people live in and around Reykjavík, where political and cultural life is concentrated. In Reykjavík the question was not one of co-opting a preexisting network but getting together those who, with the impetus of the growth of the feminist movement abroad, were already beginning to question the role of women in their society, to build their own network. It could be said that Reykjavík was all the pre-existing network that was needed. It was otherwise in the rest of the country. The Rsh. always had great difficulty in establishing itself outside Reykjavík.

In Iceland there was no crisis similar to the American ones: the failure to implement the sexual discrimination law and discrimination against women in the various radical groups (ibid.: 54-61). But as Freeman stated:

"If the strain is great enough, such a crisis need not be a major one; it need only symbolically embody collective discontent."

(ibid.:69)

One woman's crisis over lack of childcare facilities was the spark which led to action. It did epitomise the strain experienced by many of the women who were starting to discuss their situation: their dual role as mothers and waged workers. Subsequently the campaign for the provision of playschools and crèches was to be one of the first and enduring issues raised by the Rsh.<sup>3</sup>

Organisers were vital to the movement in its early days to get and prepare the statue for the May Day March and plan the meeting which would inaugurate the Movement, but subsequently, in common with feminist movements elsewhere, they tried to avoid having leaders and to create an organisation in which everyone would have an equal part.

At the end of the march the women decided to carry on working together in some way. An unadvertised meeting was held in June and a small group was deputised to organise a public meeting for the autumn. During the summer months people go on holiday and Reykjavík is very quiet as regards cultural and political activity. This is why it was decided to postpone further action until the winter.

At a meeting in September the deputised group discussed the aims and structure of the proposed organisation. It was an artist, Hildur Hákonardóttir, who suggested a form for the Movement. In an article (1971: 13-4) she described the structure she had in mind and the philosophy behind it. She rejected the hierarchical, pyramid-type of structure common

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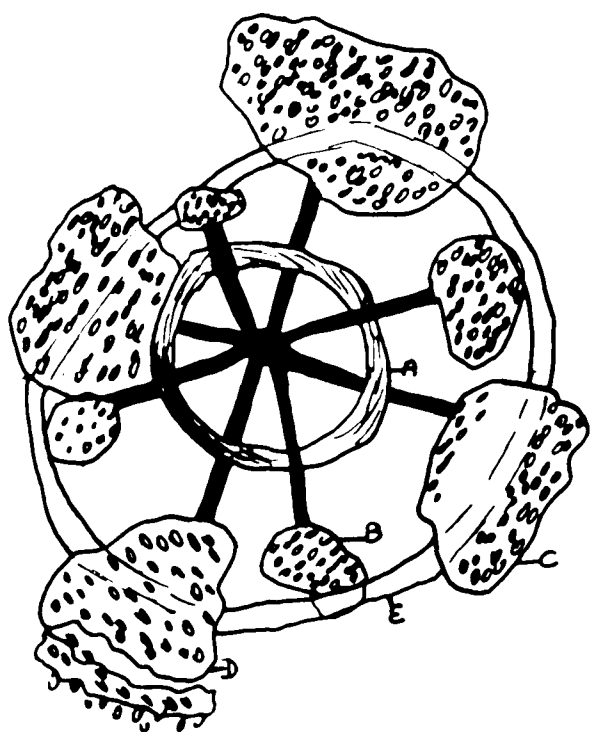
3. As shown in chapter four, the number of Icelandic women in the paid labour force had steadily increased during the 1970s and in Fróneyri as elsewhere, the provision of childcare facilities was actively discussed.



to most organisations in society and proposed an alternative non-hierarchical form for the Movement. It was to be made up of a number of workgroups (starfshópar). All members of the Movement would belong to a group which could be initiated by anyone and when its work was complete the group would find a new activity or dissolve and the members join a new group. There was to be no executive in the organisation, no chairperson, secretary, treasurer, etc. To link and co-ordinate the various workgroups there would be an information centre (upplýsingamiðstöð) which had no power over the other workgroups. Its role was to serve (þjóna) not direct (stjórna). All the workgroups would meet together regularly to inform each other of their work and share points of view. Hildur expressed this idea in a visual image.

During this time the name of the organisation became established - Rauðsokkahreyfingin. Hreyfing means a movement rather than a party (flokkur) or society (félag). Rauðsokkar means red socks or stockings and referred to the red socks worn during the May Day March and related the women to the Redstockings in Denmark. (There was also a feminist group in New York called the Redstockings). The ultimate derivation of this name may be a pun on bluestockings, which stresses the radical red nature of the organisation. The women I talked to did say they tried to find a "more Icelandic name" but could not do so and settled for Redstockings. Of more importance was the incorporation of the word hreyfing in their name. This encapsulated their image of themselves as a dynamic movement rather than a static party.

The form of the organisation had to be explained many times by the Rsh. It was described by the women at the first public meeting of the Movement and reported in detail



- A Information centre
- B New workgroup
- C Established workgroup
- D Workgroup holding a public meeting
- E Meeting between representatives of all the workgroups

After Hildur Hákonardóttir, Samvinnan, 1971:13

Figure xx Drawing of the Rauðsökkahreying Structure

by the newspapers which covered it, Hildur explained the philosophy in her article in 1971 and it was described by the Movement in the first issue of their magazine (Forvitin Rauð, 1.12.1972:13-4). Newspapers reports for the next three years felt it necessary to explain this structure.

One woman I talked to said that others found this structure incomprehensible, particularly the lack of leadership. The media wanted stars and spokespersons and other bodies a leadership with whom they could communicate. The Rsh. were not, for instance initially sent information and proposed legislation for comment by the State like the established organisations because the Movement lacked the usual structure. In time the Rsh. became recognised and it did begin to be included in committees and discussions initiated by the State. However, in 1979 the Icelandic Committee for The International Year of the Child denied them a place because "they were a movement not a society" saying "who are they, what are they?" In the period 1978-1979 the form of the organisation was one of the planks of the critique directed at the Rsh. by the Maoist party (see section 8.8.3.). The structure was modified over time (see section 8.6.) but the essentials were kept and the Rauðsokkar felt it was successful and was adopted by other groups in Icelandic society.

On the 19th October 1970 the Movement was set in motion at a large public meeting held in Reykjavík. The history of the Rsh. so far was recounted and the form of organisation described. There were speeches on women's rights, low pay and education. Workgroups were proposed on waged work, education, childraising and crèche provision, the situation as regards education and employment in urban and rural areas,

among other things. It was here that Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir first voiced the idea of a strike (see section 6.2.). After the speeches there was open discussion and at the end of the meeting about 100 people signed up for 10 work groups. On the walls of the building in which the meeting was held were various posters: paintings and cartoons, information on the participation of women at the university and the main aims of the Movement were written up:

1. To work for full equal rights for men and women in all areas of society.
2. To work against gender preventing an individual choosing employment suitable to their abilities and interests.
3. To encourage women to make greater use of the rights they already have.
4. To root out the age-old attitudes and all kinds of judgements which support the gender-related division of labour in society.
5. To encourage its members to learn about society and be active members of it.

(Alþýðablaðið:Oktober1970; Vísir:22.10.1970;  
Þjóðviljinn:21.10.1970)

#### 8.4. Spontaneity and Organisation

Quoting Lang and Lang (1961:497) Freeman suggested that it is "the dual imperative of spontaneity and organisation" that distinguishes movements from collective behaviour on the one hand and pressure groups on the other (op.cit.:47).

Later commentators rather sarcastically questioned the image of the idea of the Rsh. arising in the minds of women after the May Day March, "just like that" (Agnarsdóttir and Richardsdóttir, Þjóðviljinn:10.11.1978). Those who were involved do not deny the background to that day but I think

the retrospective emphasis on that action is because it had the "magical" quality of spontaneous communitas (Turner, 1974:127). When recalling her discovery of feminism, Rowbotham described it as passing through a magical threshold:

"But when women's liberation burst about my ears I suddenly saw ideas which had been roaming hopelessly around my head coming out in the shape of other people - women-people. Once again I started to find my bearings all over a gain. But this time we were going through the looking-glass together."

(1973:25. My emphasis)

The tone is very similar to that of the women I spoke to - the growing awareness, discussion in small groups, feeling of having "no home" and sudden coming together as women during the May Day March. The burst of energy that went into preparing for the action in a few days, the excitement it generated and the massive Venus figure (an earth-mother figure, not the Venus de Milo) draped with the message that they were subjects - human beings, not objects - piece of merchandise, identify this action as an example of spontaneous communitas.

This type of communitas can rarely be sustained:

"But the spontaneity and immediacy of communitas - as opposed to the jural character of structure - can seldom be maintained for very long."

(Turner, op.cit.:120)

Turner suggested that communitas may endure "within the domain of structure" in the form of normative communitas

".....where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in persuance of these goals, the existential communitas is organised into a perduring social system."

(ibid.:120)

The Rsh. can be viewed as an example of the spontaneity and organisation seen as diagnostic of movements - groupings which attempt to retain elements of spontaneous *communitas*. The drawing which Hildur Hákonardóttir produced was not just a model of a form of organisation but a metaphor of normative *communitas*. Further, the contrasted images that Hildur drew, of the angular pyramid representing hierarchical, technological society and the fluid, organic-looking structure for the Rauðsokkahreyfing, represented ideological *communitas*. That is, as Turner conceived it

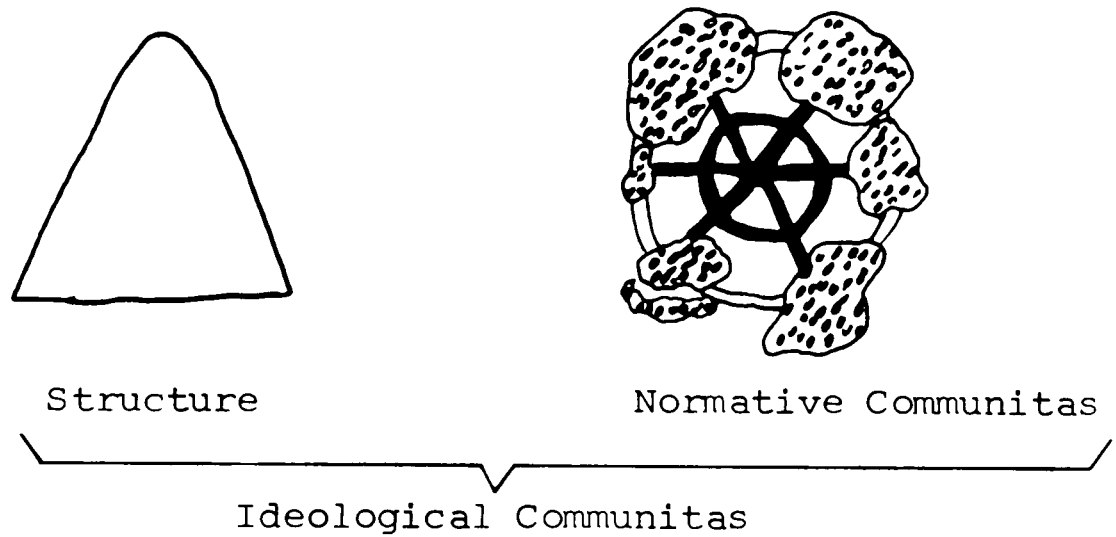
"....a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*.....at once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects - the outward form, it might be said - of an inward experience of existential *communitas*, and to spell out the optimal social conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply."

(ibid.:120)

This "explicitly formulated view" (ibid.:122) was not expressed through a lengthy utopian narrative but in the contrasted pair of visual images. Separated they represented respectively, the rejected structure of society and the acceptable form of the Movement. Paired and contrasted, they were expressive of the whole ideology of the Movement. As one of the women to whom I spoke said, the drawings by Hildur "were the philosophy of the Movement".

#### 8.5. Other Characteristics

In two particular ways the Rsh. differed somewhat from the feminist movements in the rest of Europe and America. That is, consciousness raising as a specific activity played



Drawing after Hildur Hákonardóttir, *Samvinnan*, 1971:13

Labels from Victor Turner, 1974:120

Figure xxi Pictorial Representation of the Rauðsokkahreyfing Ideology

very little part in what they did and men were included as members.

In a sense of course the whole of the Rsh. was a consciousness raising movement, aimed at the members themselves and the rest of society. In the specific sense in which it became used in the feminist movement there was very little use made of this strategy in Iceland.

"The process is very simple. Women come together in small groups to share personal experiences, problems and feelings. From all this public sharing comes the realization that what was thought to be individual is in fact common; that what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and a political solution."

(Freeman, op.cit.:118)

In their article criticising the Rsh., Hlín Agnarsdóttir and Þórdís Richardsdóttir wrote:

"After the newborn movement had spent some years consciousness raising in a particular cellar in the west end of the city....

(Þjóðviljinn:10.11.1978)

The founder members of the Movement with whom I talked said that consciousness raising played little part in what they did. One explained it in terms of not having enough time; they were students, mothers, workers who had so much to do in setting up the Movement and taking part in the workgroups. Another explained that the people who joined the Movement were ones who already had ideas and wanted to promote action and change, implying that consciousness raising was unnecessary. In addition, she said that though people talked of their personal experience, for instance about work, very personal aspects of life were not discussed "personal life is so personal in Iceland". As an example she said that



there was one woman known to be a lesbian but this was never "named or talked of". They were particularly anxious, in the face of the other criticisms and opposition they were subject to, not to be labelled as a lesbian organisation.

On the whole there was limited discussion within the Movement itself or directed outside to the rest of society about issues such as women's health, sexuality or experience of violence. The Movement did campaign for the reform of the abortion law in 1973/4, but the bulk of their work over the years concerned what could be characterised as the public areas of life - education, work opportunities, low pay, provision for children.

I raised the question of rape and violence against women in my conversations and the response tended to be that while it happened, it was not a frequent occurrence in Iceland. The feeling was that it was something of a problem in Reykjavík but in the other, smaller communities where people were less anonymous and lived near their friends and kin, public scrutiny would prevent, or provide sanctions against it. The setting up of a refuge was not seen at that time as a realistic possibility in Reykjavík because everyone would know where it was. However, during the course of 1978 the Rsh. did start a work-group which researched violence against women (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1978:3), and the subject of control over one's own body became one of the topics discussed in the workgroup for new members of the Movement in 1979<sup>4</sup>.

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4. A refuge for battered and raped women was eventually opened in Reykjavík in 1983 (Vera, 1983 no 1:36-37).

The whole tenor of the Rsh. at its inception was inclusive: anyone who wanted to work to establish equality between the sexes could belong and this included men. While the role of men in the feminist movement was to be debated in many countries, it seems not to have been an issue for the Rsh. Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir described the Movement as a human rights movement (Gísladóttir et.al.:op.cit.), and the Movement as a whole did not see itself in the mould of the older organisations which fought for women's rights. This view, coupled with the inclusive anti-structural nature of the Movement, explain why it was taken as self-evident that men should be members, rather than excluded, as was done for instance in Denmark.

Men did in fact join the Rsh. although they were always in the minority. After 1975 and The Women's Day Off the number of men fell (in the Rsh. magazine Forvitin Rauð 1.5.1976:19, one man was described as "one of the few who has not left the Movement") and this was counted one of the negative effects of The Day Off by Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir (Gísladóttir et.al.:op.cit.).

#### 8.6. Changing Times: Changing Structures

In the first issue of the Rsh. magazine Forvitin Rauð, it was stated that

"The Redstockings Movement was never founded formally, it has no rules, lists of members or minutes of meetings".

(1.12.1972:13)

In this article explaining the structure of the Movement, the commitment to an anti-structural form of organisation was re-affirmed. Anyone who subscribed to the concept of

the equality of the sexes could work in the Rsh.

Turner observed that all spontaneous *communitas* inevitably turns towards "structure and law" (op.cit.:120). The workgroup structure of the Rsh. was an attempt to incorporate the anti-structural energy into a movement which aimed to organise and campaign, but over the years the all-embracing stance became modified and the organisation formalised. Any process of change is continuous but at times the pace may be slower or faster and the results manifest themselves as particular events. Two such major breaks with the past can be discerned in the history of the Rsh.

#### 8.6.1. "The Women's Struggle is a Class Struggle"

In June 1974 the Rsh. held its first þing (parliament or congress) to discuss its future. The main debate was between those who considered that the women's struggle should be allied to the class struggle and those who did not. The women I interviewed considered this to be both the first major split in the Rsh. and an important step forward. The aim of those who promoted the idea of having a political base (grundvöllur) to the Movement was to provide a greater focus for their activities, although it was recognised that there might be a cost in terms of numbers of members. The Rsh. did not see this as a move towards party politics but the different views were described to me as right and left-wing.

Those who were of the latter persuasion were in the majority and at the congress a declaration (stefnuyfirlý-

sing) was passed which stated:

"The struggle by women for the equality of the sexes cannot be divorced from the struggle of the oppressed classes for social equality, nor can victory be won in the working class struggle without the active participation of women."

(Forvitin Rauč, 1.5.1975:7)

The declaration went on to identify women's subordination as twofold: based on economics and gender, and to note that women were the majority of low paid workers in society.

"That is why women's struggle for freedom and equality must be fought with the weapons of the class struggle".

(ibid.)

After the congress those who opposed this declaration (I was told it was only a handful of women) left the Rsh. The others saw this as a significant advance because they became more "consciously political" and subsequently made greater efforts to contact working class women. In January 1975 the meeting was held with working women to discuss low pay (see section 8.8.2.) and the issue of Forvitin Rauč in May 1975 had lengthy articles about that meeting, the class struggle and position of working men and women.

The congress was seen as significant because it identified the Rsh. as a socialist movement. It also was the first move away from the wide ranging inclusive vision of the Movement at its inception. Now it had a declaration of its purpose which incorporated an implicit theory of how to end women's oppression. Only those who agreed with this identification of the women's and class struggle, rather than those who only wished to work for women's rights, could be members of the Rsh.

Between 1974 and 1976 some organisational changes were made, such as the introduction of quarterly meetings of the whole Movement, monthly subscriptions and rules qualifying members to vote on decisions. However, the setting out of a formal constitution, rules and political platform was to come at the end of 1976 after a period of considerable upheaval within the movement.

#### 8.6.2. Formalising the Organisation

While the first congress led to a greater focussing of the ideology of the Movement, the events of 1975-76 were to result in organisational changes being decided at the second congress. This period was one of great upheaval and transition for the Rsh. During 1975 much of the energy of the Movement had gone into organising events for International Women's Year, in particular The Women's Day Off.

In the view of some Rsh. members of that time this had been a compromise and the "scene was stolen" as a woman said to me, by the established women's societies. In a newspaper interview Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir described it as the gelding or castration (gelding) of the Movement and Vilborg Harðardóttir said

"....it was good for many women  
but not for us and those women  
we wished to politicise"

(Gísladóttir, et.al.:op.cit.)

A rather different evaluation was given by younger members of the Movement in 1980 when they wrote, in connection with the response to the Rsh. when it began:

"Others tried to ridicule and laugh at this, and no doubt continued to laugh right up until 24th October 1975 when their smiles became frozen on their lips at the great women's strike".

(Bjarnadóttir et.al.:op.cit.  
my emphasis)

Yet another view of this period came from two women, Hlín Agnarsdóttir and Þórdís Richardsdóttir, ex-members of the Rsh. who were to take part in the critique of the Movement in 1978-79 (see section 8.8.3.). They said that rather than the Movement being "castrated" during this time, many new people joined after International Women's Year and there was a lot of work being carried out within the Movement but it was to limited effect because they believed the Movement was unable to cope with such an influx of people (þjóðviljinn, 10.11.1978).

It appears that in their disappointment over the way in which Kvennafrídagurinn was promoted (and with the benefit of hindsight) the older Rauðsokkar members discounted the extent to which The Day Off, although a compromise, could reach people in a way similar to how the May Day March of 1970 inspired them. New members with new ideas joined the Rsh. and in retrospect, when I talked to founder members, some of these new members were seen to be representatives of the ultra-left who worked to take over the Movement. The view of one of the founder members I talked to was that:

"We knew and they did not and perhaps still do not that these are male groups, male orientated".

It was felt that these ultra-left (pro-Soviet and Maoist communists) endangered the links that had been built up

with working class women:

"To them working women are a theory and they do not see them as people".

"They frightened off the working women with their political theorising - it was like talking latin to them".

Clearly both sides believed that all was not well with the Rsh. at this time but ascribed different causes: the older members, the ambitions of the ultra-left; some new members, the lack of organisation and political vision of the Movement. During this time there were power struggles between the various interest groups within the Movement and matters came to a head with the publication of the issue of Forvitin Rauð 1.5.1976.

This issue included articles announcing a second conference on women's low pay, a report on the campaign to save the milk and bread shops (see section 8.8.2.), a discussion as to whether women and men should be in mixed or separate unions and interviews with a waged working woman and an unemployed woman. There was also an article on women in China, an extract from Zetkin and Lenin's writings on The Woman Question and a partial reprint of a 1933 article by The Icelandic Communist Party on the position of housewives. At the end of the magazine a message from the publications workgroup, which was responsible for producing it, stated that in their view the work of the Movement needed scrutinising. They suggested that the Rauðsokkahreyfing had failed to take a political stance on certain issues, such as the NATO base, lacked a constitution and democratically elected executive and there was a need for discussion of the future, purpose and goals

of the women's struggle (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1976:23).

After it was printed there was an attempt by some of the other members of the Movement to buy up the issue because they disagreed with the contents. Later this was recognised as being an undemocratic act and the copies of the magazine were returned to the Movement's office and made available for distribution again (Agnarsdóttir and Richardsdóttir, op.cit.; Miðstöð Rsh., Þjóðviljinn: 18.11.1978).

Part of this struggle within the Movement concerned its organisation. An organisation workgroup (skipulagshópur) had been initiated by Hlín Agnarsdóttir to "compose a new political platform and form of organisation for the Movement". These proposals would be debated, accepted or rejected at the second congress to be held in the summer of 1976 (Forvitin Rauð 1.5.1976:2 and 19). Some women, including Hlín Agnarsdóttir, left the Rsh. in the spring after the dispute about the magazine. The issue of the political basis of the Movement and its organisation was however, discussed at the congress which was held in November and important changes were made. These were set out in the December issue of Forvitin Rauð.

An opening paragraph confirmed the alliance of the equal rights struggle and class struggle and the impossibility of achieving full equality in society as it was. The position of women within the family was stated to be the underlying cause (undirrót) of women not being on an equal footing (jafnfætis) with men. Despite the number of women providing for themselves and their children and the large percentage (60%) of married women having a job



outside the home, society still had the view that there was a woman in every home serving the needs of the family. Children were brought up to see running the home as women's primary responsibility. That women were used as a reserve of labour, low paid, unable to play a full part in society because of their role and their work as mothers being undervalued were also mentioned.

The role of the Movement was then set out in seven sentences, which included the fight for a new society, equality and freedom; the fight against oppression and all kinds of violence in the world; promotion of the consciousness, social development and fighting spirit of all women; and support for the struggle of women everywhere against oppression.

The twelve particular aims of the Movement were:

- A living wage for an eight hour working day.
- Full employment for all.
- Security of employment for all.
- Equal pay for work of equal value.
- Equal rights to all types of employment.
- Equal access to employment.
- Shortening of the working day and provision of school meals.
- Good and free crèches for all children.
- Six months maternity pay for all.
- Sex education in schools.
- Free contraception.
- Abortion on demand.

Having set out the basis for their understanding of the position of women in society and the chief ways in which they were subordinated, their ideals and aims, the constitution (skipulag) of the Rsh. was explained. After the internal struggles of the previous winter, the original structure was no longer seen as adequate and a formal constitution was agreed which stated in its second article that the Movement was independent of all political parties and other organis-

ations. The system of workgroups was retained with one person chosen by the members of each group to liaise with the information centre (miðstöð) and other groups. To increase communication within the Movement the groups were to give regular information about their work and the miðstöð were to publish news of their work in the Movement's newsletter. Major decisions were to be taken at the quarterly meetings where voting members would be those who had worked in a group, worked at the offices in the evenings or paid the monthly subscription for the previous six months. At these quarterly meetings two of the eight member miðstöð would step down and two people elected to replace them. Four permanent workgroups - concerned with publications, the running of the office, contact with the rest of the country and trades unions were named (Forvitin Rauð 1.12.1976:3-4).

This description does not exhaust the provisions of this new constitution of the Rsh. but it does demonstrate the extent to which the Movement had moved towards having a formalised structure. This did not just take place because of an inevitable process but as a result of the internal struggle engendered by sectional interests. The open form of organisation which served during the first years of the Rsh. was no longer perceived to be adequate. In order to avoid the type of events which had taken place during the previous year and to make the work of the Movement more effective, a constitution and set of rules were drawn up.

In practice it was still felt a few years later that there continued to be too little connection between the various workgroups and a change in the constitution was made. At each quarterly meeting the work of the Movement was to be discussed and set out for the next three months. It would be

divided between the various workgroups and the results published in an issue of Forvitin Rauð or presented at a public meeting.

## 8.7. Campaigns, Growth and Developments

Rather than go through the history of the Rsh. from its beginnings, some of the key campaigns and developments will be described here: raising awareness and issues, specific campaigns, practicalities and problems.

### 8.7.1. Raising Awareness and Issues

Founder members of the Movement said they felt there had been a change in style in the Movement over the years. At the beginning they had "wanted to let people know they existed" and had taken part in agitational activities. In 1972 they organised a public protest against a beauty queen contest and at Christmas 1974 demonstrated with a life-size dummy of a housewife hanging from a Christmas tree. They asked "is this our Christmas?" to point out that the festive season was hardly a holiday for women.

This sort of activity meant that public attention was directed at the Rsh. and they were invited to speak to many societies and organisations. They took part in radio and television programmes and in early 1972 they had 10 half-hour radio programmes of their own broadcast, under the collective title of "Ég er Forvitin - Rauð" (I am curious - red).

It was from this series of broadcasts that they took the name of their magazine Forvitin Rauð (Curious Red), which was first published in December 1972. Subsequently this

came out at once or twice a year - containing views of the Movement and articles on various aspects of the women's movement in Iceland and abroad. It was produced by one workgroup of the Movement each year and in accordance with their principles, did not represent the views of the Rsh. as a whole, but of the individual authors and workgroups which contributed to it. This policy was eventually to lead to trouble within the Movement in 1976 as described in the previous section.

In 1975, International Women's Year þjóðviljinn, a main stream left-wing newspaper, started having a weekly equal rights page (jafnréttissíða) which was produced by members of the Rsh.. The page was retained after 1975 so the Movement had a regular weekly forum in subsequent years. As with Forvitin Rauð, what was written was considered the view of the authors, rather than the collective view of the Movement; unless it concerned matters agreed by the Rsh. as a whole.

#### 8.7.2. Campaigns

Members of the Movement emphasised the energy and enthusiasm they felt in the early days. They were keen to gather information and mount campaigns on particular issues. In the first few months they carried out a questionnaire survey of Kópavogur, a suburb of Reykjavík, into the provision of day-care facilities for children. The results, showing an overall lack of such facilities, were published and discussed at a public meeting (Vísir, 19.2.1971 and section 8.8.2.). In 1973 the Movement co-

operated with the Women's Rights Association to collect a petition in support of a bill in the Alþingi to provide state aid for the building of day-care facilities for children.

This issue was to be an enduring one for the Movement, coming up in their discussions with trades unions about the position of low paid women, particularly as in 1975 the Alþingi voted to remove State aid for kindergartens etc. and other social services. In 1979, The International Year of the Child, renewed emphasis was put on the question with articles in Þjóðviljinn (Ógmundsdóttir et.al, :20.1.1979; 3.3.1979; 24.3.1979) and co-operation with other interested groups to collect a petition about the need for increased day-care facilities.

The Rsh. not only initiated the discussions of issues but responded to them as they arose. In 1973 "The Concept of the Breadwinner" (Fyrirvinnuhugtakið) was one of the political issues of the day. That year the Congress of Scandinavian Countries (Norðurlandsráð) which worked to harmonise laws in the Nordic countries, had resolved that laws on marriage, tax social security etc. should be changed so that women and men were on equal footing. (This resolution ultimately derived from the work of the Nordic Federation of Women's Rights Associations over a number of years (Sigurðardóttir, 1976b: 7)).

The Rsh. arranged a meeting on the issue in October 1973 at which the position of Icelandic women in law and their experience as waged workers and housewives was discussed. Actual changes in the laws about social security, maternity leave, discrimination in employment and a new law on equal rights were to be passed later during the

1970s.

The second major issue in 1973-74 was abortion. The Rsh. had first raised this subject publically at a meeting in 1971 with the Women's Rights Association and its youth branch Úur, because the laws of 1935 and 1938 were being reviewed. They criticised the government, because the committee considering the issue was made up entirely of men and as a result one man was taken off it and a woman appointed in his place. Later in the year, after the election of a new government, a member of the Rsh. was appointed to the committee (Sigurðardóttir, 1976c:6).

The Rsh. was in favour of abortion on demand and this was named as one of their key demands when they agreed their constitution and list of main demands in 1976. In 1973-1974 they campaigned on this basis and devoted the January issue of their magazine to abortion and contraception. There was wide debate in Iceland about the new bill because it proposed abortion on demand. In the event it was not passed but it was felt that the implementation of the existing laws was improved and abortion was relatively easier to obtain.

In 1975 most of the Movement's energy went into preparing their activities for International Women's Year (see chapter 6) and following through their commitment to a socialist platform by increasing their work with trades unions and working class women (see section 8.8.2.).

These are only some of the issues raised by the Rsh. over the years. The list does not include the work they did in other areas such as translating feminist books from abroad and holding exhibitions and celebrations.

### 8.7.3. Practicalities and Problems

For its first few years the Movement had no offices of its own but in October 1974 they opened their centre Sokkholt near the centre of Reykjavík. This meant they had a settled base from which to carry out their work and a place for people to come for information. The centre was open for a couple of hours in the evening on weekdays and members of the Movement took turns to be in the centre to answer the telephone and be available to visitors. The centre was also usually open on saturday mornings for people to drop in. During the winter of 1978-79 these saturday mornings were used to discuss books and on a couple of occasions authors were present to discuss their work.

One consequence of the opening of Sokkholt was that money for rent, heating etc., became a problem. Initially the Movement had no system of subscriptions and was financed by individuals making voluntary contributions and the sale of their literature (when this made a profit). It was not until 1976 that a regular monthly subscription was instituted but a lack of funds was to be a continuing problem. There was also periodic difficulty in getting enough people to be in the offices during the evenings, particularly during the summer months.

Another long term problem was establishing groups outside Reykjavík. In 1973 there was a workgroup in Ísafjörður and at various times members who moved from Reykjavík attempted to set up groups, but never to long term effect. In most issues of Forvitin Rauð there were calls for people outside Reykjavík to get in touch with the Movement. In

1976 the rural workgroup (dreifbýlishópur) was made one of the permanent groups in order to tackle this problem. In 1977 it was reported in the newsletter (Staglið, April 1977) that they had written to other parts of the country and received some response but the group felt new ideas were needed on how to increase contacts outside Reykjavík.

One way in which they did extend their work outside the capital was to hold special meetings in other towns. In 1977 one work-group researched the life and work of an author and artist, Ásta Sigurðardóttir. They presented a programme about her in Reykjavík and later took it to Neskaupstaður in the east and Ísafjörður in the north-west. In 1978 a meeting called From Morning 'Til Night was first given in Reykjavík and then repeated, in part, in Akureyri in the north.

The original members of the Movement I spoke to characterised themselves as people who had come to the Rsh. with their own ideas and in 1978 they perceived a problem of "educating and politicising" new members. An active member at the time also spoke of the difficulty of absorbing new members when they came en masse, as usually happened after a public meeting. One way they tried to cope with this was to have a special workgroup for new members and in 1979 its programme included reading and discussion on the family, waged work, control over one's own body, socialism and the history of the modern women's movement.

For themselves, the older members felt that they wanted to retain a connection with the Movement but as one of them said:

"We who have worked so long and hard in the Movement are tired



and do not want to be in a work-group so our own organisation is a problem."

The organisation of the Movement had changed over time, as the last section showed, and in 1979 it seemed likely that further modifications would have to be made.

## 8.8. Relationships with Others

In this, the final section of the chapter, the links and relationships with other sections of Icelandic Society are considered. The groups examined are the older Women's Rights Association, trades unions and working class women and ultra-left parties.

### 8.8.1 The Women's Rights Association

Anna Sigurðardóttir, a member of the Women's Rights Association of Iceland (K.R.F.Í.), was especially invited to the first public meeting of the Rsh. in 1970. What she said, as reported in *Vísir*, 22.10.1970, was hardly what the Rsh. expected to hear. She compared them to Sleeping Beauties who had failed to wake up in the hundred years that working women had been campaigning for the increase of women's rights. She suggested that though they had, at last, responded to the "alarum clock" sounding in Holland, Denmark and America "nothing new has happened, except a lot of noise and red socks." Anna criticised them for their lack of regard for the "old women" of the K.R.F.Í. but said that she and others were glad that at last young people were going to "roll up their sleeves" and go to work. When I talked to her some years

later, Anna was still of the opinion that the Rsh. and K.R.F.Í. had basically the same aims and she saw the Rsh. as carrying on the same work as the K.R.F.Í. and other women's associations, rather than being a new phenomenon.

The founders of the Rsh. saw things rather differently. One I talked to, who had had contact with women in the K.R.F.Í. felt they were fearful of being criticised by the younger women. Another said that the K.R.F.Í. did not interest her because it had failed to keep up with the times. The view of at least one of the original members of the Movement was that the Rsh. was not a women's movement. "þetta var ekki kvennahreyfingin" she said to me, disassociating it from the women's rights platform of the older organisation.

In an interview in 1977, Helga Ólafsdóttir and Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir said that the K.R.F.Í. only wished to rectify those things that affected women, which was totally contrary to the aims of the Rsh. As an example of the basically conservative attitudes they perceived in the K.R.F.Í. they mentioned the petition to increase women's participation in party politics - which in their view was meaningless without a fundamental change in society, and their celebration of the ordination of the first woman priest "a woman who preaches a doctrine hostile to women" (Ógmundsdóttir et.al., 1977:5)

The founders of the Rsh. saw their Movement as a human rights movement, which was the major reason why men were accepted as members. The K.R.F.Í. did not begin to admit male members until 1972 and in early reports about the Rsh. this was given as one of the formal reasons why the Rsh. did not affiliate to the K.R.F.Í. (eg. Ólafsson, 1971:15). In addition, whatever the view of members of the K.R.F.Í., the people who set up the Rsh. felt they were something new, stri-

ving for a new society - which was expressed in their workgroup structure. The K.R.F.Í. had the formal, pyramid-type of organisation which the Rsh. rejected. To have affiliated to the K.R.F.Í., would I suggest, have been contrary to one of the main principles of the newly founded Movement. To have become just another society under the umbrella of the K.R.F.Í. was not what the Rsh. wanted and would have meant the loss of what was the major expression of their ideology - their free and open structure.

Over the years the Rsh. did work with the K.R.F.Í., as it did with other organisations, in support of particular issues such as the provision of crèches and the revised abortion bill. However, the Rsh. always retained its separate identity and declared its independence of other organisations of all types.

#### 8.8.2. Working Class Women and Trades Unions

Anna Sigurðardóttir had criticised the Rsh. at their first meeting for their lack of interest in working class women. Their relationship with such women was always a sensitive issue within the Movement. Most of the founders, and through the years, the members of the Movement were middle class, educated women. The women I interviewed emphasised that they saw themselves as working women, if not working class. They were coping with the problems of finding work suitable for their qualifications, doing waged work and studying, while raising a family.

Some of the original workgroups began to research issues that were central to the women's own experience: low pay, failure to comply with the existing equal pay legislation,

provision of crèches and other childcare facilities and national insurance provisions. At a meeting held in February 1971, just a few months after their founding, the Rsh. presented the results of research they had carried out on the availability of crèches etc. in Kópavogur, a suburb of Reykjavík. The meeting was held with the Students Union and representatives of the City Council's Social Committee to pressure the Council to provide more facilities for children (Vísir, 19.2.1971).

Later the same year the results of a survey by the wages research workgroup (Launarannsóknahópur Rauðsokka) were published in Samvinnan (1971:25-6) and discussed at a two day conference held in November. At the same conference Svava Jacobsdóttir, an author and M.P., talked of the law she had proposed that year (it was passed in 1973) which incorporated the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

The first edition of the Rsh. magazine Forvitin Rauð (1.12.1972) had articles on day-care for children, the tax position of married women and reviewed, in scathing terms, a book on the role and duties of personal secretaries. The following year Forvitin Rauð (1.5.1973) had articles about women's work in fish-factories, discrimination in job advertisements and the lack of women's participation in trades unions. This issue of the magazine was largely concerned with women's waged work role to co-incide with the May Day Union March. While the Rsh. were not themselves working class women in the main, they had many of the same problems as such women and from the beginning began to raise these issues and carry out much needed research.

At the meeting in November 1971 a question was asked about what attempts the Movement had made to get in contact

with "uneducated women" (ómenntaðar konur) out in the labour market and the response was that the Movement had written to the executives of unions but received no replies (Þjóðviljinn, 27.2.1972).

It was after the departure of the "right-wing" members in 1974 and declaration that the Movement allied itself with the class struggle that the Rsh. began to put more and more emphasis on forging links with working class women and the trades unions. In 1975 the Movement held its first meeting with women trades unionists at a two day conference held in January. It was described to me as a very significant meeting because the women there were the working women themselves, ordinary trades unionists, rather than the executive of the unions. The main issue discussed was low pay and one woman told me:

"It was the first time that low paid women came and talked of their position as important!"

The conference considered the dual role of women - which meant that they worked harder and longer than men, and pressed trades unions to campaign for day-care facilities. Another change they wanted to see was the provision of school meals (so that women were not tied to the home). As regards women's waged work role, the conference pointed out that the equal pay law was circumvented by categorising men and women differently, that piece-work paid on a bonus system was tiring and harmful, and there was a lack of women officials in the trades unions (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1975: 7 and 12).

That year, 1975, was International Women's Year and the Rsh. devoted two of the three programmes they had on the radio to the role of women in working life. During the

winter of 1975-6 the Movement supported the strike (for a guaranteed working week) by women fish workers in Akranes and started a fund to help them (see section 4.6.5.). A second meeting with women trades unionists was arranged in May 1976 which was to concentrate on women's work experience and trade union activities. All unions with women members were circulated and about 200 people attended the conference. Among the issues raised in speeches and discussed at workshops were women's participation in unions and representation on executives, health and safety at work, the educational role of trades unions and low pay.

One of the issues debated at the conference was the planned closure of the specialist milk shops in Iceland. The conference opposed this, particularly because many of the women shop assistants were middle aged and older (93 of the 164 women affected were aged 50-70) and unlikely to get other employment. During that year petitions were collected, a demonstration march organised by the Rsh. and the support of other trades unions and the Icelandic T.U.C. sought, but the closure of the shops went ahead (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1976:3 and 11; 1.12.1976:7 and 18).

After the internal disputes of 1976 the trades unions workgroup was made one of the permanent groups of the Movement. It began its work in 1977 by carrying out research on the history and organisation of unions. At the instigation of some women union members it started holding regular "open houses" to which anyone could come for information and all the unions and work places in the Reykjavík area were circulated with news of this development (Staglið, April 1977). The trades unions group became

the biggest and most active workgroup of the Movement and the low pay of women the most publicised issue taken up by the Rsh. In 1977 the issue of Women's Struggle For Freedom (Kvenfrelsisbaráttan) was chosen to be the subject of the University Students Day on 1st December<sup>5</sup>. The Rsh. contributed to the newspaper (1. Des. Blað Stúdentna, 1977) published in connection with this and used the radio broadcast to talk about working women.

Once again to draw the attention of the country to the working role of women, the trades union group started planning a celebration of International Women's Day - 8th March in 1978. In conjunction with the Society of Socialist Women (Kvenfélag Sósíalista) and Icelandic Women's Union for Culture and Peace (Menningar - Og Friðarsamtök Íslenska Kvenna) a meeting was held at which women's historical and contemporary experience of waged work and unemployment was recounted with readings from memoirs, novels, newspapers and in song. Towards the end of the meeting all those there were invited to "join together to struggle for the freedom of women and all other subordinated groups". And yet it was at this very time that the Rsh. was itself being criticised by a section of the ultra-left for its "bourgeois stance".

### 8.8.3. The Ultra-Left

The opening shot in what was to become a heated war of words between the Rsh. and a section of the ultra-left

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<sup>5</sup> The 1st December is marked each year by the university students holding a meeting. The subject for the meeting is decided by an election.

came towards the end of January 1978 with the circulation of a leaflet. Under the heading "Make the 8th March a Day of Struggle", people were invited by a "planning group" (frumkvæðishópur) to the inaugural meeting on 1st February of The 8th March Movement (8. Mars Hreyfingin - 8.M.H. for short).

In the text of the leaflet there was a sentence on the history of International Women's Day, noting that it had been little observed in Iceland and that the women's struggle there had been led by "educated and upper-class women (mennta - og yfirstéttarkonur). An outline of the "main struggle facing us today" was then given - to make the trades unions revolutionary movements, day-care for all children, full employment and no mass lay-offs, abortion on demand. The leaflet condemned all world imperialism and stated that preparations for war between the U.S.S.R and U.S.A. had never been greater. Women were identified as an important force in the struggle for freedom - "but freedom only comes with the victory over imperialism".

In one section of the leaflet it was stated:

"When the women's struggle is brought to mind, most people think of the Red-stockings Movement and then of their platform which attacks men, the home and having children. Campaigns of that sort characterise that movement although good, activist women have worked in it.

The chief enemy of women is not men and not all women are in the same economic position. It is not men who send us out into the labour market in times of expansion and home again in recessions, it is not they who cut the budgets for day-care facilities and increase the fees, and it is not they who keep down working women's wages. It is the employers and their regime which do this, and it is against them that the struggle should be directed. We have therefore no



common purpose with women who belong to the employers' class."

The public response of the Rsh. was two short paragraphs, in articles which dealt in the main with other issues, on the equal rights pages of Þjóðviljinn (Kristjánsdóttir et.al.: 11.2.1978; 4.3.1978). The news of other people celebrating the 8th March was welcomed, but that they, the Rsh., were bourgeois and "in opposition to men, having babies (their own?) and the family" was rejected. In the second article they identified the 8.M.H. with the Maoist party in Iceland.

No direct statement of the political allegiance of the planning group of the 8.M.H. was given in the first leaflet. The references to world imperialism and condemnation in equal terms, of Russia and America were indications. In February the newspaper (Verkalýðsblaðið, 15.2 - 1.3.1978) of the United Communists Marxist-Leninist (Einingarsamtaka Kommúnista marx-lenínista)- Eik (ml) for short - a pro-Chinese group, devoted its front page and some inside pages to the new group. There was a report of the first meeting and structure of the organisation. It had a five women executive and a number of workgroups - taking up the structure which Rsh. had initiated. There were to be meetings of these workgroups, of 8.M.H. as a whole to discuss issues, and they planned a public meeting to celebrate the 8th March. The paper urged its readers to support and take part in the 8.M.H.. On March 8th two separate meetings to mark the day were held and between them attracted about 600 people. Outside the halls in which each other's meetings took place members of each movement handed out leaflets about their meeting.

What was singular about the campaign ('dialogue' or 'dispute' seem inadequate to describe it, and military metaphors proliferated as it became more intense) that Eik directed against the Rsh. was the extent to which Eik took the initiative and the almost theological intensity which characterised it. There was great scrutiny of texts; key words and concepts assumed powerful importance and in June Eik issued a list of the six greatest ills (deadly sins?) of the Rsh. in their newspaper (Verkalýðsblaðið, 13-27.6.1978). The metaphor that comes most readily to mind is of the Inquisition examining a suspected heretic, except in this case it was an inverted inquisition with the 'new force' examining the established group.

The substance of Eik's campaign revolved itself around a number of key issues<sup>6</sup>:

1. The structure of the Rsh.
2. Whether the Rsh. currently or had in the past committed itself to a number of key points which Eik named.
3. The Rsh. theory of the origin of women's oppression.
4. The meaning of the word feminism.
5. The association of the Rsh. with some political parties.

Thus Eik was criticising the Rsh. in terms of its structure, ideology and practice - a root and branch condemnation of it as a whole. Though these three bases of the critique can be separated analytically, in the way they were put across by Eik they were interrelated.

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6. My analysis of Eik's criticism of the Rsh. is drawn from the following sources: Dagblaðið, 7.3.1978; Rauðliðinn 1978 no.2-3: 62-73; Verkalýðsblaðið, 15.2-1.3.1978, 1.3-14.3.1978, 13-27.6.1978, 20.2.-6.3.1979 and the speeches made at the debate between Eik and the Rsh. on 15.2.1979.

### 1. The Structure of the Rsh.

In the view of Eik the Rsh. had no executive de jure but there were de facto leaders, educated middle class women who determined the course the Movement took. They also thought that the workgroup structure meant that workgroups could act against each other and cited the example of 1976 and the dispute over the May issue of Forvitin Rauð that year. It was asked whether the Rsh. was an interest group or a pressure group and whether it was adequate to conduct a true struggle against society as it was.

### 2. Key Commitments

Condemnation of world imperialism by the two super-powers and the need to make trades unions truly representative of the working class were key concepts and slogans of Eik. These were stated as relevant to the women's movement because there had to be recognition that Third World women suffered from imperialism and in capitalist society it was their class position which was the most important cause of women's oppression. The trades unions were seen as taking part in the process of society as it was, under the direction of their leadership and so had to be changed so that they really represented working class interests. Rsh. literature was scrutinised, quoted and found wanting in any strong commitment to these views. It was stated that they had never really reached working class women and had only dealt with the leaders of unions. So here, both in their theory and practice the Rsh. was found to be in error.

### 3. The Origin of Women's Oppression

Eik's view of this followed strictly on Engels' analysis in The Origin of Private Property, The

Family and The State. At one point in the debate between Eik and the Rsh. a man shouted into the microphone that Engels had exactly described the origin of women's oppression, that it started with the development of private property and with the victory of the working class all oppression including that of women, would be ended. The Rsh. was said to have attributed the origin of women's oppression to their position in the family, which for Eik was but the manifestation, not cause, of their oppression. This attitude of the Rsh., according to Eik, explained why they attacked men and the family.

#### 4. The Meaning of "Feminism"

For Eik, the Rsh. stance on the origin of women's oppression was "pure and simple feminism and nothing else" (Baráttuhópur um Kvennamal, 1978:66). This was not a compliment. For Eik feminism was a term of abuse. I said this was a war of words and Eik had gone to the length of looking in "English Swedish and French" dictionaries (ibid:62) to find definitions of feminism. In them they found that it meant "the women's rights struggle to get equal rights with men in bourgeois society". Eik's view was that feminism's roots were the struggle of bourgeois women to take part in the 'free competition' of the market economy on an equal footing with men of their own class and was against the class struggle of working women (ibid:62-3). For Eik the distinction between bourgeois and radical feminism was "all wrong" and that really the Rsh. identified men as the chief enemy of women. (ibid:64).

#### 5. The Association of Rsh. with Political Parties.

Here the charges were that from the beginning

there had been, in the Rsh, women who were members of the main stream and other political parties and the Rsh. had been influenced and directed by them, in accordance with their political interests. The split in 1974 had only been between conservative women and members of the main stream Socialist Party (Alþýðubandalagið). After the conservatives had left, the Socialists, Trotskyites (Fylking Byltingarsinnaðra Kommúnista) and Communist Party (Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands/Marx-Lenínista - KFI/ML for short) had used the Movement. They were quite happy with the lack of a rigorous political platform and unstructured organisation because it allowed them to forward their interests. This association was exemplified, according to Eik, by the fact that the Rsh. had marched with Fylking and KFI/ML in the May Day March in 1978 and had held their 8th March celebration in conjunction with the Women's Association for Peace and Culture, which supported Russia.

One of the ideological and organisational differences between Eik and the Rsh. was that the former considered they should and did speak with a collective voice, while for the Rsh. this was only deemed possible when an issue had been debated and voted on. These differing stances were exemplified in the presentation of their literature, particularly as it concerned the debate between the two movements. Eik's articles in its newspaper were unsigned and the longcritique of the Rsh. in their magazine Rauðliðinn was signed by the "struggle group on the women's question". The responses coming from the members of the Rsh., whether written by individuals or workgroups were held to be the views of the individual authors and

did not represent a collective view unless it was points quoted directly from the constitution or political platform agreed in 1976. Therefore as regards many of the criticisms Eik made, the Rsh. did not have a collective response.

As noted earlier, the only public response coming from the Rsh. in the early months of 1978 was when the members who produced the equal rights page in Þjóðviljinn wrote a couple of paragraphs replying to what the 8th March Movement had stated about them. The strategy was really to try not to dignify the attack by giving it too much recognition. However, there was a lengthy reply to the changes made by Eik in the issue of Forvitin Rauð 1.5.1978. It was written by the Trades Union workgroup and stated that they had decided to respond because people might believe what was being said.

Later in the year the debate was carried on when Hlín Agnarsdóttir and Þórdís Richardsdóttir, ex-members of the Rsh., wrote a couple of critical articles. They had never directly identified themselves as members of Eik or 8.M.H., but Hlín had made positive references to China and Albania in the contentious issue of Forvitin Rauð in 1976 and in their second article in Þjóðviljinn 20.1.1979, Hlín and Þórdís referred readers to the Eik criticisms of the Rsh.. Certainly they were seen as associates of Eik by members of the Rsh., continuing the campaign against the Movement. A direct confrontation between Eik and the Rsh. came in February 1979 when Eik invited the Rsh. to a meeting, ostensibly to debate "How to Build a Revolutionary Women's Movement". It is from the published articles<sup>7</sup>

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7 Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1978; Þjóðviljinn, 11.2.1978, 18.11.1978, 3.2.1979, 24.2.1979.

and the arguments at this debate that the following account of the response coming from the Rsh. is derived.

### 1. The Structure of the Rsh.

Although the organisation of the Movement had become more tightly defined over time, the Rsh. still placed a lot of value on its workgroup structure. For them it represented a working democracy and helped women gain confidence in putting forward their ideas. It was also pointed out that changes had occurred over time and that now collective decisions were made by vote at quarterly meetings. That the Rsh. was a movement which had changed over time and would continue to do so was one of the Rsh.'s general answers to Eik's charges. It was used in this instance by saying that the organisation of the Movement was continuously under review and that the change, to having a general work-plan for each quarter year, had been made recently. It was also stated that Eik was tied to the pyramid, hierarchical structuring of society in that they saw that to build the women's movement there should be Eik at the top, then their women's organisation (S.M.H.) and thirdly collective action, in support of large causes, with other interested parties (Ógmundsdóttir et.al., Þjóðviljinn: 24.2.1979).

### 2 Key Commitments

As regards world imperialism it was said that of course members of the Movement opposed it and were against the presence of the NATO base in Iceland. However, it was also said that the exact position on Russia had not been debated within the Movement so there could not be a collective line on it. It was known however, that views on world imperialism differed within the Movement and they did not wish to divide the Rsh. on this because it was

not seen as a fundamental issue on which there should be agreement to work together against women's subordination.

As regards the issues of the trades unions, Sólrún Gísladóttir wrote in an article (Þjóðviljinn: 3.2. 1979) that Eik seemed to see its greatest work as criticising other left-wing groups, whereas the Rsh. did not take on this role. The Rsh. constitution said that the Movement should work with the trades unions and others towards agreed goals. She questioned the logic of Eik in seeing the leaders of the unions and the unions themselves as one and the same thing and that therefore to work with them was to engage in class collusion.

### 3. The Origin of Women's Oppression

One of the women I spoke to said she felt that the Rsh. had something of a "phobia of theory" and that they needed to do more work on the origin of women's oppression. The statement of 1976 had identified the root of women's subordination as the part they played in the family. A lengthier analysis in Forvitin Rauð (1.5.1978: 13) had stated that "the corner-stone of society" the family, was the cause of women's oppression. An analysis of women's role in the home, particularly after the development of capitalism, was given.

At the debate there was much said about the origin of women's oppression and the role of the family. Eik accused the Rsh of contradicting marxist orthodoxy, of seeing men and the family, not capitalism as the chief enemy. The Rsh. seemed ill-prepared to debate the correctness or otherwise of Engels' view at the debate because at a meeting prior to it, when the subject was discussed,



there was no one present who had read Engels (except myself). Although they could not debate this issue on Eik's terms they did strongly express the idea that the role of the family today needed to be examined and new forms of social organisation in society were needed.

#### 4.. The meaning of Feminism

Eik had seen the Rsh. use of the word feminism and their concept of radical feminism (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1978: 12-13) as indicative of their bourgeois stance. In her response, Sólrún Gísladóttir, (op.cit.) argued that it was quite possible to take a radical feminist stance, that it had as much historical validity as bourgeois feminism and even Engels had not been shy of using the term.

#### 5. Association with Other Political Groups

The Rsh. reiterated that all "right-wingers" had left the Movement in 1974 and now it was made up of people of the left, with varying views, but who agreed with the basic constitution of the Rsh. The Rsh. was an independent organisation, ever changing as its membership decided but prepared to work with other groups in appropriate circumstances. On the other hand, the Rsh. saw Eik as undertaking a divisive course of action. It was attempting to build its own strength by attacking other groups. The Trade Union workgroup described it as having an isolationist and divisive policy (Forvitin Rauð, 1.5.1978:19) and Sólrún suggested that they could not see the wood for the trees and forgot the main enemy - capitalism (op.cit.).

There is no doubt that this debate during 1978-79 was as much about the 'correct line' of the various ultra-left groups as about women's subordination and the best form of movement to achieve change. Part of the battle also took

place within the students union with Eik removing itself from co-operation with the other left-wing groups. The Trotskyites and other Communist Party entered the argument about the Rsh. through the pages of their newspapers (Neisti, 26.2 1978; Stéttabaráttan, 7.4.1978). The Communist Party, KFÍ/ML seemed to try to play the role of honest broker in the middle. The Rsh. was reproved for past misconceptions such as "feminist attitudes" (again used negatively) but was given credit for trying to work more with the trades unions and working class women. Their main ire was reserved for Eik who were seen as manipulating the 8.M.H. and attacking the Rsh. as part of their deliberate policy of criticising other left-wing groups.

In this political-ideological struggle words were the weapons used. Some of the earliest exchanges concerned whether each had quoted the other correctly, for instance, had 8.M.H. called the Rsh. bourgeois and said they could never work together? The scrutiny of texts by both sides played a great part in the debate and exactly worded commitments were taken as indicative of policies and concepts.

In a sense the wheel had come full circle in relation to the Rsh. As stated, all the criticisms made by Eik of the Rsh. can be seen as concerned with its structure, ideology and practice. The criticisms that had been made by the Rsh. founders of the older women's rights organisations can also be seen as relating to the same things: their hierarchical structure, equal rights policy and failure to keep up with the times.

There were fundamental differences though. Criticisms of other groups had not been a policy decision of the Rsh. and did not occupy a great deal of their time. The Move-

ment did not set out to build itself by attacking others, but by drawing upon and articulating the ideas of those who had begun to question women's role in Icelandic society. At that time the Movement had been enthused with the energy of communitas, was looking outwards at society and had no history to defend. Nearly a decade later it was being pictured as a spent force, made up of bourgeois careerists - as part of structure.

The Movement's initial tactic was to ignore the attack but increasingly it was drawn into a debate. One of the main lines of argument was that the Rsh. was an ever evolving movement - but through time it had acquired a history and this now had to be defended. An ideological commitment in the present and for the future, to an anti-structural form, could not protect the Movement from the criticisms of those who perceived a structure in the history which the passage of time had inevitably given them.

In 1970 when the Rsh. began its activities, the Movement's aim of criticising existing society and developing an alternative type of social order was encapsulated in the form of organisation it adopted. This was expressed in the images that Hildur Háhonardóttir drew. Over time the Movement became more structured and this process can be epitomised as a move from images to texts. As the Rsh.'s structure became more formalised, ideas on the roots of women's subordination and programme needed to change society more refined and set out in publications, the Movement became vulnerable to the critique stemming from an alternative ideological group. Eik, I would suggest did not represent a new anti-structural movement but a new structured group offering an alternative orthodoxy - a developed ideology

and set of tenets. Above all, Eik used a style of communication where exactly worded messages and the scrutiny of texts for approved formulæ played a vital part. Despite their continued commitment to an anti-structural form, the Rsh. had acquired a history - open to multiple interpretations, to defend. It had developed a degree of orthodoxy in its own right in the shape of its analysis of society but was drawn into the debate on Eik's terms. In a decade there had been a shift from the confrontation of the anti-structural Rsh. and Icelandic society to a debate between two alternative structures - that of Eik and the Rsh.

<u>Icelandic Society</u>	<u>Rauðsokkahreyfingin</u>		<u>Eik</u>
	<u>early 1970s</u>	<u>late 1970s</u>	
Structure	Anti-structure	Structured	Alternative Structure
	Heterodox	Developing Orthodoxy	
	Inclusive	More Exclusive	
	Demonstrative Events	Conferences	
	Gathering data	Celebrations	
	Image - summing up form, ideology and practice	Texts - setting out constitution, political stance, rules.	

## 8.9. Conclusions

I left Iceland just a few weeks after the public debate between Eik and the Rsh. That had been a very contentious occasion and in their published reports each side had written of the fundamental differences between them. Eik promised to continue its debate about the Women's Struggle with the Rsh. and others, while on the equal rights page of

Þjóðviljinn members of the Rsh. said that Eik and its associated movements (referring to 8.M.H.) had nothing to offer women who wanted a radical women's movement (Verkalýðsblaðið: 20.2. - 6.3.1979; Ógmundsdóttir et.al., Þjóðviljinn: 24.2.1979). Yet at the very same time members of the Rsh. and 8.M.H. were meeting to arrange a joint celebration to mark 8th March that year. This took place and they had another shared meeting a few days later on the issue of women, children and day-care facilities.

I was not present to see how this new phase of the history of the Icelandic Women's Movement developed. I do know that the process of Icelandic women becoming visible continues, takes new forms and forges new alliances. By 1983, two of those on opposite sides of the argument in 1978-79 were involved in the same cause of increasing women's participation in public life. Sólrun Gísladóttir was elected to Reykjavík City Council in 1982 on the Women's List and Hlín Agnarsdóttir was on the editorial board of Vera, a magazine produced by the organisation that promoted the Women's List.

The success of the Women's List in the 1982 local elections was preceded by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir's election as President in 1980 and was itself followed by three women on the Women's List becoming M.P.s in the general election of 1983. The current phase of the feminist movement in Iceland revolves around the issue of advancing women's role in public life.

The history of women's collective action in Iceland can be traced back at least a hundred years and has been examined in the parts of this thesis called Visible Women and Becoming Visible. The different types of women's

organisations - early women's societies, the suffrage movement, trades unions, women's rights societies and modern feminist movement were discussed in their context - a country which has experienced a rapid change from being a poor, foreign-ruled agricultural/fishing society to being an industrialised, independent, nation state with a high standard of living. Invisible women, the first part of this thesis, a detailed analysis of the position of women past and present, provided the backcloth for the discussion of the manifestations of feminist action in Iceland.

In chapter one I wrote that it would be most appropriate to end this thesis by examining a continuing process and I have no doubt, as the tenth anniversary of The Women's Day Off approaches, that the century-old struggle of Icelandic women to change their society and end their subordination will continue and take other forms in the future.

A thesis ends but life does not. I have chosen to finish in this way because as Agar wrote:

"There is a human group out there who lived in a world before the ethnographer appeared and who will continue to do so after the ethnographer leaves."

(1982:783)

From "WINGS OVER ICELAND"

"I am no longer so quick to laugh. Just before the outbreak of the second world war I became acquainted with a foreign philologist, a most intelligent and well-read man. We spent some time together reading Icelandic poetry, and it did not matter whether the themes were of Icelandic or foreign origin my friend was always able to perceive the Icelandic poet's message.....

On a day of vivid autumn colours we had been reading the poem about the woman in the saga, the earl's daughter from Sweden, who saw the glaciers of Iceland rise from out of the sea in the company of the man she loved, shared a grim fate with him far from her homeland, with difficulty saved the life of their sons, and then for the rest of her life had to mourn the killing of her outlawed beloved. When we reached the end of this poem my friend seemed to be lost in the dim thoughts of nature's struggle and cruel destiny that it had evoked. I took up the books and then came by chance across the poem about the lost bird "Which nobody loved and which flew across the icy wastes, a doomed soul, full of despair, a prayer in every wing-flap... winter, the fury of the elements..." and my friend gave a great roar of laughter. What was the poet driving at? I did my best to describe the trackless glaciers, the loneliness, the unlimited and purposeless desolation, the stormtossed bird, whose sense of direction had been confounded by the wild weather, the winter and the dark. Since that day I have not been so quick to laugh, for I know now that other people's experience can never be understood by words alone."

Broddi Jóhannesson '

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