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Is Finland to become the first country in the world to pay housewives? Lesley Adamson examines the prospect and looks at the Finns enlightened approach to liberation

The longest running pay dispute of all

FINLAND in the brief autumn is a grey hiatus. The too hot summer and the tourists are memories. The Christmas card winter of ice and snow is yet to come. So rain drips dismally through the fading light and everything waits.

This year one of the things the women of Finland are waiting for is the outcome of their campaign to pay wages to stay at home wives and mothers. If it succeeds they will be the first women in the world to have their traditional contribution to society acknowledged in such a practical way.

But if it happens, it won't happen to Finnish women throughout the country immediately. It's a regional matter, and only in a couple of regions has the campaign got as far as schemes being put to local authorities for consideration when they parcel out their money for next year's budget.

The amount of cash mentioned in the schemes doesn't make homemaking very far up the wages ladder, but few women are willing to make an issue of that just at the moment. It is the principle which is important, not just for Finnish women but for the rest because if there is a happy ending to the Finnish campaign then there could inevitably be repercussions across the globe. If Finland points the way, it will

be that much harder for the others to resist going down the same road.

It would not be the first time that Finland had leaped into the "liberation" lead, either. In 1906 it became the first country to give women the vote, and since then it has generally taken an enlightened approach to matters like back-up services for working mothers. The modern women's movement might well claim credit for some of the recent improvements in the lot of the Finnish woman, but she already had a head start over the women of many other nations.

The movement itself has declined in popular appeal since the last decade. In the Sixties the movement drew in the professionals and middle-classes, and now it is losing many of them, following a universal pattern. The emphasis had shifted, said one woman who used to be enthusiastic and active. Now she dissociates herself entirely.

She had felt in the beginning it was worthwhile to campaign for specific things for women; suddenly she was

part of a movement that was campaigning against men. If the battle for women's legal rights and social status was largely won, why couldn't the movement have used its influence to make life better for people, regardless of sex, why did it all become so negative? No one could give her the answers, and so she left.

Of course, there were no easy answers. Several years ago Finnish writers were pointing out that women in Finland had more rights than many of them dared to use. Its a mainly rural country with half a million living in and close to the capital, Helsinki, and the other four million scattered very thinly indeed across the pine forests, lakes and peatlands. You can drive for hours without seeing a soul, perhaps never meeting another car. And the lives of many of the rural women follow the time honoured shape; sharing the farmwork and letting the "progress" of the big city and the world beyond pass them by.

A divorced woman can still be made to feel disgraced if she returns

to her home village (though naturally, a divorced gamut of social stigmas which used to keep women everywhere "in their place" are alive and well and living in the backwoods. Gradually and inexorably the old attitudes are breaking down, but in the meantime there is a reluctance by the women to make much use of the rights that have been freely given or won for them.

Presumably that's how the Finnish husband likes it, because in Helsinki where over 60 per cent of the married women work, practically all jobs are open to them, one in three marriages ends in divorce and the suspicion is that the figure will rise.

Finland, which spends an enormous amount on health and social care, has long accepted the one parent family and provided eagerly for it. Unmarried mothers, for example, can live in special single parent communities with resident nurses to care for their children while they work or study. When they move out after a year or two they are helped to find flats.

A single woman — or man — bringing up a child is given top priority because the government deems it in the national interest to ensure that the children are not "disadvantaged," as current jargon has it, and therefore likely to grow up to be burdens on the State.

It was in that gap between official equality for women and the unofficial discrimination against them that the women's movement flourished. Having seen women achieve so many legal rights, it was frustrated by seeing that social attitudes at a personal level lagged behind. True, more than a quarter of the seats in the Helsinki parliament are held by women, and that compares well with other countries. True, more than half the students at the universities and colleges are women, and that's good news.

But the liberated lady working at a professional job in Helsinki is likely to insist that the jobs are in practice harder to come by, that the pay is often unofficially lower, base rate and probably no more. And, familiar grumble, she's convinced that

women have to work harder and longer for promotion — and quite likely not get it even then. Nothing, in fact, has changed.

Like all societies, Finland has a social pecking order which is only explained by delving into its history, but results in day to day discriminations. Until fairly recently the Swedish speaking Finns were top dogs, assured of the pick of the jobs, certain of the university places. Even now the remnant of that superiority keeps the Finnish speakers waiting in the shops while the other customers get the service and the smiles.

Of course, said one Swedish speaking Finn, the old system was not fair, the minority should not have ruled the roost. And yet she admits there is nostalgia, among the Swedish speakers, for the old days, and she was shocked that her son had to go to Sweden to get into university.

Finland has some 400,000 young men and women studying and working abroad, and the problem has been well known to the other factions

of Finnish society for generations.

If the Swedish speakers were on top of the pile the Lapps came a long way down, and there is concern in some quarters that the north of the country is neglected while there seems to be no shortage of money for lavish health projects and social services in other regions. And on the lowest rung come the gipsies, a Finnish "problem" since they crossed the Russian border, but barely accepted as part of Finnish society at all.

If the Helsinki professional woman who told me she was disillusioned with the women's movement is still tempted to think of herself as a second class citizen she hasn't to look far for assurance that there are several other classes to go before she reaches bottom. And that's one of the things she had in mind when she talked about working towards better lives for people, instead of pursuing ever narrower aims for women.

It would come, after all, to much the same thing, she said: "Until we improve and change men's lives, how can we expect them to accept the changes in women's lives? We know from experience that unless both men and women are ready for changes, they are not worth making; either women don't make use of their new rights, or they risk divorce, that kind of freedom is that!"