



FROM

MAID

TO

MINISTER

**Miina Sillanpää
Fought for Equal
Rights in Finland**

By Hanelle Ottschowski

When I returned to Finland in 1964 as a teenager after spending most of my life abroad, I was amazed at the many special days when the Finnish flag was hoisted. On October 1, the flags fly for Miina Sillanpää, one of the first nineteen women elected to the Finnish Parliament in 1907, and twenty years later, the first woman to hold a government post as Minister of Social Affairs. Throughout her life, she was a fierce advocate for the rights of the disadvantaged, elderly people, and women as a whole.

In the nineteenth century, life was hard for the people who subsisted on small farms and, with increasing industrialization, people flocked to the towns that

offered factory jobs, creating a growing working class with little to no political representation.¹

Miina Sillanpää was born the seventh child of a poor family in a village in 1866, during the Great Famine—a devastating demographic disaster. At the age of twelve, Miina started working in a factory until she was able to get a position as a maid. She was an activist for social and civil progress throughout her life, founding the Servants' Association in 1898.² Miina then fought for women's suffrage until 1906, when Finnish women became the first in Europe to be granted the right to vote and run for office. The following year, she was elected to parliament. During Miina's 38 years as a member of

parliament, she continued to work tirelessly to improve the position of women in society.³

How Did It Happen?

In Finland, women's suffrage was part of the larger class question. Influenced by German social democrats like August Bebel and Clara Zetkin, Finnish women believed that only in a classless society free from capitalism would gender equality be possible.⁴ Clara Zetkin wrote in 1889, "The working-class women, who strive for social equality, expect nothing for their emancipation from the women's movement of the bourgeoisie, which supposedly fights for women's rights."⁵ Clara Zetkin had a great influence on northern European women, and the fight for women's rights in Finland became a fight for social justice. It was not so much a question of women against men but a question of justice for all.

In her dramas, the Finnish author Minna Canth (1844 – 1897) described the misery of the proletarian population, drawing attention to how hard it was for women to lead a self-determined life.⁶ Canth's stark realism raised awareness that helped pave the way to women's suffrage.

Russian History

In 1809, Finland, no longer claimed by Sweden, was taken over by the Russian Empire as an autonomous Grand Duchy with a guaranteed constitution and its own legislation, government, and administration. The Senate consisted of Finns, but the Russian Governor General had the final say.

In 1899, Tsar Nicholas II issued a manifesto that would abolish the right of the Finnish Diet to legislate, transferring all power to St. Petersburg.⁷ Despite Finnish resistance, the Governor General Nikolai Bobrikov was given dictatorial powers in 1903. Upon his assassination in 1904, the Socialist Party of Finland demanded that the national rights of the Finnish people be preserved and enforced, along with domestic and social reforms for the working class and, ultimately, a new parliament, elected in equal and secret elections.⁸

On May 28, 1906, Finland was given the most modern parliamentary system in Europe, consisting of 200 deputies who would be elected every three years through general, equal, direct, and secret elections according to the rules of proportional representation.⁹ All citizens over the age of twenty-four were now allowed to vote, women and men alike.

General and Free Elections

Within less than a year, polling stations, electoral committees, vote counting, and candidate nomination had to be organized, and citizens were instructed how to vote. Women in particular had to learn about their new opportunity to make an impact.

One campaign advertisement written by Mrs Hedwig Gebhard addressed the women directly with the words:

Sisters,

The time for the elections is drawing near.

The Finnish woman is the first in Europe to whom suffrage has been granted. Let us perform with honour the duty that this entails. Sisters! Let us ensure that not one of us is absent when the composition of Finland's first truly democratic Parliament is being determined. A heavy burden of responsibility will lie on the shoulders of the woman who stays away from the election without due cause.

Matters of conscience that Finnish women hold dear are first and foremost:

Supporting the State Church

Furthering decency

Establishing prohibition

Improving the position of women.

All those issues will be debated in Parliament. Therefore, sisters, rise up to cleanse society and vanquish the enemies of our homes.

– From Mrs Hedwig Gebhard's election proclamation¹⁰

The elections were held on March 15 and 16, 1907, and ended with an overwhelming victory for the Social Democrats. Nineteen women were elected to the first parliament (9.5%), including Miina Sillanpää.¹¹

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A Role Model for Finnish Women

Miina Sillanpää did not have much formal education—she had only received instruction from itinerant teachers (Finnish *kiertokoulut*, literally “itinerant schools”) and at a factory school.¹² She used every opportunity to read and was an avid learner. She also worked as an editor for the magazines that the social democratic women’s organization published for women. Until 1930, married women were not eligible to work as accountable editors and were subject to the guardianship of their husbands. An unmarried editor herself, Miina Sillanpää campaigned especially for the rights of working and single women and was active in establishing women’s shelters. She helped to found an organization that maintained homes for unmarried mothers (*ensikoti*) and their children, saying, “We have to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.”¹³

During the civil war of 1918, Miina Sillanpää urged for peace in Finland. She was a member of the party activity group of the Social Democratic Party from 1918–1919 and 1933–1940, and also acted as chairwoman of the Social Democratic Women’s Association and the Social Democratic Working Women’s Association.¹⁴

Sillanpää was awarded the honorary title of *talousneuvos* in 1939, and in 1949 she received the Finnish Cultural Foundation’s award for merit for her life’s work from President Paasikivi.¹⁵

Today, there is a Sillanpää society in Finland that commemorates and continues the work that Miina Sillanpää started. On its website, her life’s work is described in this way:

Miina Sillanpää spoke strongly for equality, for human dignity. In Miina’s time, inequality was based on major social problems: class differences, poverty, insecurity in the face of illness or in old age. As she wrote in 1921, Miina Sillanpää’s thinking was based on human dignity, the right of everyone to well-being, humane working conditions, and respect for humanity. These values and principles were reflected in the way Miina and other women MPs with working-class backgrounds raised the major social problems of the time and sought practical solutions to them, both in Parliament and in other activities. The social problems of the time were not only gender issues, but also to a large extent women’s issues.¹⁶

Miina Sillanpää has remained a role model in the struggle for equality and women’s rights even after

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her death in 1952. She said, “I only did my duty.”¹⁷ It was natural for her to stand up for what her heart was passionate about. She said, “One should never say, ‘I don’t know how,’ but instead, ‘I will try!’”¹⁸ Without knowing that Miina Sillanpää had said it, this was the motto of my life because my Finnish mother had taught me that, “Nothing is impossible!” If we unite not only as women, but as women and men, we could change the world for the better.

Miina Sillanpää’s key values, fairness and equality, motivated her work and were influenced by Christian ethics. Education was in the hands of the State Church until 1921 when the compulsory education law moved the responsibility of education to the local community schools. Most of the population belonged to the Lutheran faith, the State Church, that had been a great cultural influence ever since the Reformation.¹⁹ In Finland, being a socialist did not in practice conflict with an individual’s religious beliefs, and the Finnish socialists supported religious freedom.²⁰ Religious socialists who combined Christianity and social democracy were influential within the party. For them, Jesus was the exemplary hero and the “first socialist” to improve the conditions of the poor. Among the working classes, religion played an important part. All that Miina Sillanpää stood and worked for were core values of the Christian golden rule. A short video produced by the Sillanpää society has the title, “Will, Faith and Daring.”²¹ These three words describe Miina very well. She had the will to change society, the faith that it was possible, and the daring to become active.

Miina Sillanpää had the opportunity to see the great changes her efforts brought about. In her parliamentary work, Miina always reached out to the other side to find consensus and make improvements to the life of the working population. She was known as somebody you could approach with your problems and who would try to find a way to help. She invested her whole life in the process. She noted that “It is true that it is good to see and hear that the work that you have done with all of your heart receives recognition and understanding.”²² Finland’s first female president, Tarja

Halonen, considers Miina one of the founding mothers of the welfare society.²³

Miina's courage in tackling social injustices by fighting to improve the conditions of those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds made a profound difference in Finnish society. She was a feminist in the best sense of the word, fighting for equality and respect for women. "I would like to raise awareness among women, to make them understand their privileged position. I cannot understand why women should be satisfied with being at the mercy of others, why they need to tolerate being undervalued."²⁴

Looking back at her life, Sillanpää reflected, "If I could start it all over again and someone asked me: 'What would you do?' I would reply, without hesitation: 'The same things.'"²⁵

The Finnish nation recognized the impact of Miina Sillanpää in helping to create an egalitarian society and has answered her question, "Dear friend, do you want to contribute to building an ideal future society?" in a positive way. That is why a flag day to honor Miina Sillanpää and the Day of Civic Participation was instituted in 2016, the year commemorating 150 years since her birth. If I were in Finland on October 1, I would raise the Finnish flag with great gratitude!

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Notes

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