

## The same world, a new generation

*Women are making parliamentary history, but does that set Finland apart?*



*The leading five: Li Andersson (left), Katri Kulmuni, Antti Rinne, Anna-Maja Henriksson, and Maria Ohisalo, are the current leaders of Finland's government parties. (Picture: Instagram, Katri Kulmuni)*

**In Finland it isn't uncommon** to find an ice hockey arena full of people. But on the first Saturday of September, the crowd filling one in the small, southeastern town of Kouvola was a little different than what you would expect to come upon. Men in their beige and dark suits, women in modest, knee length floral dresses and even babies dressed in national costumes – striped skirts, little white aprons, vests, and caps looking like handkerchiefs.

Beer was not floating nor were the hallways echoing with cheers and pop-rock tunes from the nineties. Yet, the feeling of a great sporting event remained in the corridors leading to the ice rink. What was ahead was just a different kind of sport. Party politics.

That Saturday, instead of a hockey game, the arena hosted an additional caucus of the Centre Party, gathered there to choose a new party chair. And on the now covered ice, standing behind a white

podium speaking to the audience stood a seemingly young woman, with her hair pulled back, wearing a pink-and-white striped Marimekko robe. “Here’s a young woman for you,” said **Katri Kulmuni** briskly as she presented herself to her party colleagues.

Throughout her speech Kulmuni did not show one sign of being insecure or shy about her young age. In fact, it was quite the opposite. One point, she even compared her political character to **Kyösti Kallio**, the country’s fourth president between the years 1937 and 1940, who like her became the party’s leader at a younger age.

Not long after stepping off the stage, the Marimekko-wearing northerner was elected to lead the Centre Party, having turned 32 just a few days before.

The Centre Party is built on good old Finnish values: home, religion and homeland. Some might describe those as conservative, some might question what they even today mean. Traditionally, it is a party of farmers and people living in rural areas. The party of rye bread and milk – and their makers.

Kulmuni is the third woman to ever become the party chair. Since June, and the formation of the new government she has also been the Minister of Economic Affairs. Though Kulmuni is the former deputy leader of her party and not a newcomer to politics but rather someone who has worked her way up and has the right kind background (she grew up on a farm in Lapland), she was still seen as a fresh choice and part of a new generation.

Even if Kulmuni is only the third woman to lead the Centre Party, as a female party chair in the Finnish parliament she is currently far from being alone.

**The situation is historic.** For the first time, women now lead the majority of the political parties in the Finnish parliament. In other words, five out of eight parties are in the hands of a woman. So Kulmuni is not an exception, but the latest female parliamentarian to be chosen as the head of her party.

As striking as the gender of the new party leaders is their age: three of the female party leaders are under 35. All this stands in contrast with Finland’s three biggest parties, each headed by the more traditional political leader, a middle-aged man.

Finland is a country with a proportional electoral system that leads to multiparty coalition governments, but the make-up of the government has never looked this multifaceted. With the victory of Kulmuni, four out of the five government parties are run by women — another political milestone.

It is not that long ago when a scene like this would have been nearly impossible. Not only because of the superior number of women, but also for the fact that these new young party leaders dare to look and act like their age instead over aging 20 years overnight when rising to power.

Looking back at the last two parliamentary elections, one could have guessed female candidates rising to power. And many would say that for a country like Finland, it was about time.

**The tiny Nordic nation has actually** made history several times when it comes to equality.

In 1906, the country was the first in Europe to give women the right to vote, only behind New Zealand and Australia in the global race for women's suffrage. That same year Finland also gave women the right to stand for election — being a clear forerunner, especially in Europe, to do so.

This is all the more remarkable because it happened before the country declared independence from Russia in 1917, women obtaining the right to engage in gainful employment without their husband's consent two years later, and guardianship laws that said husbands did not anymore control the livelihood of their wives in 1930.

What led to women having voting rights so early on compared to many other nations was the reform of the parliament. And it was not only women who were given voting rights, but importantly for the making of Finnish society, everyone of the age 24 and over were.

Before this modernisation people in the working class were not allowed to vote, as the parliamentary system was based on the four Estates. The reform, pushed by the general strike, was possible even under Russian reign because at the time the giant next door was experiencing momentarily weakness after having lost a war against Japan.

Since only about eight percent of the Finnish people had the right to vote before reforming the parliament, the main goal was universal suffrage: voting rights to each and everyone.

Interestingly, these three countries (Finland, New Zealand, and Australia) have at least two things in common, and they both help in explaining the reform of voting rights. They were all strongly agrarian societies, where men and women shared the workload on their tiny family farms. Also, each of these countries were in political turmoil, hoping to cut ties with the motherland or in the case of Finland, with the Russian Empire.

But why were women included? The answer lies not only in the strong suffragette movement (Finland had two organisations representing women), but also in the fact that the labour party where women

had a say was pushing the issue. Somewhat important is the fact that the temperance movement stood behind equal voting rights, too.

Also, women's right to vote had been discussed since the 1890's, Womens union had been set up in 1884, there were women studying in universities and working in factories. The general strike gave a possibility to push for the change, but ground for the issue had been laid earlier on. And then there were women like the gutsy writer **Minna Canth**, the woman who is celebrated each year on the day of equality, who pushed and agitated for the issue.

But what is even more striking than voting rights, and what really sets Finland apart from New Zealand and Australia, is the fact that Finnish women, even poor women from the working class, managed to get elected as members of the parliament.

Then, with all the wars (World wars, Civil War, Winter War, Continuation War and Lapland War), progression stalled.

**It wasn't until 1980 when** the government first proposed an action plan for gender equality. The act was adopted seven years later.

In 1990 **Elisabeth Rehn** put Finland on the map again by becoming the first female in the world to be chosen as Minister of Defense. It took Finland ten years after that to elect its first, and thus far only female head of state, President **Tarja Halonen**.

Even if nearly half of all ministers in the 21st century have been female, Finland still hasn't had more than two female prime ministers. All this is in a way very telling.

Might the country be partly blindsighted by its success story of equality?

To **Hanna Wass**, an academy research fellow in the faculty of social science at the University of Helsinki, the answer is yes.

"It is almost dangerous to say Finland is the perfect example of equality," Wass says and adds:

"That picture is not completely skewed, but it is not the whole truth either."

In a video call from her office in the capital Wass argues that it is important to keep in mind the broad scale of arenas people use power in societies.

“What kind of power are we talking about, institutional or hidden? Who are, for example, invited to committees as experts?” Wass continues by pointing out that when a woman is leading a committee, the committee invites more women in as experts.

Even more hidden is the power wealthy and well connected people use.

While **Jenni Karimäki**, a senior lecturer at the Centre for parliamentary research in the University of Turku, believes things are getting better and power is generally more equally distributed, she, too, underlines that overall the scale is not yet in balance.

“When looking at big companies corporate management middle-age men are still clearly over-represented,” Karimäki said in a recent phone interview.

And indeed, Finland was late in the game when it comes to the discussion of female corporate leadership.

But since change has to begin from somewhere, maybe the world of politics is going to act as a model to other manly corners of society.

“This generation of women might not be satisfied with positions in the middle-management,” Karimäki adds.

A whole different story then is how long it will take for the corporate culture that is still strongly dominated by men, to truly perceive women as equal and capable candidates for CEO positions in every field.

**In the parliamentary elections** of spring 2015, Finns already witnessed a small phenomenon of young women rising to the parliament. Among them, two of the current party leaders.

“Maybe there was a need for a young female” said Kulmuni during her parliamentary-victory press interview at the time, clearly taken aback after having received a larger share of votes than the iconic Finnish politician **Paavo Väyrynen**.

For both victories in 2015 and 2019, political scientists were quick to comment on how young female politicians seemed to have built their success in municipal and youth politics.

Now, there are more women in the Finnish parliament than ever before. Of all 200 members of the Finnish parliament, 94 are women (47%).



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“This generation has definitely worked its way up from student politics and youth parties” says senior lecturer Karimäki.

Before, it was often men, who gained a name in youth politics and then rose to power with the support they had built in among other men. Women, on the other hand, used to only be allowed to gain experience leading specifically women’s organizations, like Christian Democratic Women in Finland and The Feminist Association Unioni. This new generation of feminist politicians, Karimäki says, didn’t need to seek positions of power from organizations representing just women.

“So maybe something has indeed changed,” she notes.



*The Finnish government. There are 11 women, 7 men as ministers. Only one government before this has had as many female ministers. (Picture: Instagram, Katri Kulmuni)*

**When talking about Finland** it is nearly impossible to avoid the topic of education.

Finnish women, now the third most highly educated among OECD countries, obtained equal rights to study in universities in 1901. This not only played a part in getting equal voting rights, but has had a long impact.

The education gap between Finnish women and men reached a record breaking level a year ago. The proportion of highly educated women in Finland had surpassed that of men already in the early 1990s.

Nowadays women's share of all those who have completed a university degree is 58 percent. OECD countries average is 38 percent.

All this is closely tied to elections and voting.

In Finland, every citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote and you do not need to go through the trouble of registering to vote. Yet, some people are more active in using this right than others and there is a clear pattern: The more educated you are, the more likely you are to vote.

This explains the steadily rising amount of women elected to the parliament, and in part the upturn of women as party leaders.

Finnish women have voted more actively than men in all Parliamentary elections since 1987. In the spring 2019 Parliamentary elections women's voting percentage was 2.9 percentage points higher than men's. In this spring's elections the total voter turnout was 72 percent, the highest percentage since 1991.

While getting more and more educated, the percentage of women elected to the parliament has steadily risen: In 1970 over 20 percent of those elected to the Parliament were women. In 1983, over 30 percent of those elected to the Parliament were women. And then, in 1991 it jumped to almost 40 percent.

**Even if women** in these latest elections rose to nearly equal share of the parliament, the percentage of women running for parliament was only 42.

And though a man is leading only one of the five government parties, that one does happen to be the party of the prime minister, the Social Democratic Party, SDP.

Like SDP, Finland's two other largest parties, National Coalition Party Kokoomus and the Finns Party (formerly known as The True Finns) are also led by men. And unlike SDP, the last two have never been led by a woman.

This does shine light to the fact that there are parties, like the Green Party and the Left Alliance, that are more ready than others to select women as their leaders. How does this then translate to the latest crown jewel of Finland's feminist history and leader of a conservative Centre Party Katri Kulmuni?

As the new party leader Kulmuni replaced the former prime minister, a middle-aged man and a self-made millionaire with a very religious background. He was voluntarily stepping down after taking the blame for the worst election result in a long while. Kulmuni's opponent in the party-leader race

was a man 13 years her senior. It was this, too, that played to her benefit, not least because of the spring's devastating election defeat.

“It is important to take notice of the situations in which women are being chosen to lead,” says senior lecturer Karimäki. According to Karimäki traditional parties often choose women leaders when in need of a messiah, someone who is new and different and gets voters attention.

In the case of the Centre Party one could say Kulmuni, who actually has more political experience than her middle-aged predecessor did when taking the lead, is still a safe choice. Yet, besides her qualifications and experience, her gender and age also played a part in her victory.

“The fact that young women did so well in this spring's elections off-course benefitted Kulmuni, because that was the electorate the Centre Party was not able to attract,” explains Karimäki, and adds another explanation to the female wave that swept over the parliament; the hard-ball politics of the last almost all-male government.

According to both Karimäki and Wass the female gender is now more appreciated in party politics than it has historically been.

Academy research fellow Wass continues:

“Politics are more about identities and many people are ready to pick their candidate from two or three different parties, as long as the person they are voting represent them and their personal values.”

To some extent, this also explains why women often make the conscious choice of voting for other women.

“A newer phenomenon is that young men do not vote just other men, but women, too.”

When looking at Finns in their twenties, especially the ones that have grown up in cities, this is not too surprising. There are young men who proudly wear “I’m a feminist” t-shirts, and young men who do not see gender as a defining label.

**All the while Finnish women seem** to be gaining momentum in politics and young women become more and more equal to men, there is one ugly stain that ruins the Nordic equality idyll across all Scandinavian countries: violence against women.



With celebration of equality it is easy to forget that Finland has been late to legislate features of violence against women: rape in marriage became a crime in 1994. Compared to other countries in the European union, that was rather late.

Internationally, Finland has made the headlines with the issue more than once. In 2014, a study by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency found that Finland was the EU's second most violent country for women, with 47 percent of women experiencing physical or sexual violence from the age of 15 on.

There are help-lines and safehouses, but why does Finland not seem to get much further in solving the problem? Some blame it on the insufficient resources, some say that the mere statistics of amounts of violence do not tell the whole story.

Even if partner violence, especially towards young women, is quite common in Finland, the statistical findings do not support the idea of violence becoming more widespread. One simple explanation to these gloomy statistics might come from young women, who according to one study report the different types of violence more actively and on a broader scale than women have previously done.

“Could we not think that all these reports are an example of the position of women getting better?” Wass ponders.

Yet, there is no simple explanation to why women in a seemingly perfect welfare state fall victims of domestic violence. Finnish academic **Minna Piispa** has in her research found that “while many theories of violence against women refer to the role of gender inequality that makes women vulnerable to violence” it fails to be the explanation for the situation in Finland. Piispa explains this in stating that Finnish women are not financially dependent on their spouses.

However, violence against women is a global phenomenon, a problem tied to power relationships, and it is at least partly explained by the fact that men try to hold on to power. Could that explain Finland's ugly statistics, too?

**One explanation to violence** against women comes from the patriarchal structure of society. That same society is the one that Katri Kulmuni and her coevals need to find their way in.

Academic researcher **Johanna Mäkelä** found in her dissertation research of female politicians that women feel men still get ahead easier than they do, and that women in politics are judged more easily (and harsher) than men are. They also felt that their capability to have both: a family and a career in politics was easily questioned — while with men the question does not come up.

The argument is an easy sell, confirmed just by looking at the headlines during a few weeks: The female party chair of Left Alliance **Li Andersson** was speculated to announce her pregnancy at the

press conference she was holding (she announced she will race for another term as a party leader), socialdemocratic Minister of Transport **Sanna Marin** shocked the yellow press when telling that her husband is “the one who mainly takes care” of the couples infant daughter, and Finland’s first female commissioner to the European union **Jutta Urpilainen** got a post as the commissioner in charge of the EU’s international partnership and development policy that earned her the nickname “Mama Africa”.

Results of the latest Gender Equality Barometer (2017) make the case of Finland still being a patriarchal society even stronger. According to the barometer the majority of Finnish women felt that men are in a more privileged position in society compared to women. As a Finnish woman, that is not a hard claim to swallow.

The barometer also told that women feel unequal in working life (be it lower salaries or taking family leaves), that in families with two partners the responsibility for housework continues to be divided traditionally (which causes conflicts) and women continue to face sexual harassment.

These findings gain support from the public statistic authority Statistics Finland. According to their data women spend more time doing home chores than men, and the chores they do are the ones traditionally perceived as belonging to women: grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and childcare.

The skewed picture of equality is complete with the fact that when a man earns a full euro, a woman earns 84 cents.

And can we say for sure that even Finnish politics is now, thanks to last spring’s elections and the amount of women as party chairs, really becoming more equal?

Senior lecturer Jenni Karimäki is not ready to jump to conclusions.

“Of course we can not say too much on the basis of these single elections. It may be things have indeed turned around, but whether or not that is true, only time will tell.”

And it is not like gender balance is the only equality concern in Finnish politics, reminds academy research fellow Hanna Wass. But concentrating on gender structure might reveal other issues, too:

“Gender aside, party leaders are all very much branches from the same tree.”

And with that equality conversation Finland is definitely trailing behind.