

## The day the women went on strike

*On October 24 1975, 90% of Iceland's women refused to work, cook or look after children. The effect was incredible, recalls Annadis Rudolfsdottir*

Gudrun Jonsdottir still remembers what she was wearing on October 24, 1975. She was 21, just married with a young child, and was not going to cook, clean, and was definitely not going to work. Nor was my mother, my friends' mothers, the shop assistants in the supermarket, the teachers – in short an estimated 90% of women in Iceland. A neighbour, the mother of three boisterous boys, left her family to fend for themselves at 5 am and did not return until late in the evening. Remarkably, although Icelandic society was almost brought to a standstill that fine day, its women had never felt so alive, so purposeful and so determined.

When the United Nations proclaimed 1975 a Women's Year, a committee with representatives from five of the biggest women organisations in Iceland was set up to organise commemorative events. A radical women's movement called the Red Stockings first raised the question: "Why don't we just all go on strike?" This, they argued, would be a powerful way of reminding society of the role women play in its running, their low pay, and the low value placed on their work inside and outside the home. The idea was bandied about, and finally agreed to by the committee, but only after the word "strike" had been replaced with "a day off". They figured this would make the idea more palatable to the masses and to employers who could fire women going on strike but would have problems denying them "a day off".

In the days preceding the 24th it seemed that women everywhere were grouping together, drinking coffee, smoking incessantly but doing a lot of agitated talking. My granny, who was working incredibly hard in a fish factory, was not going to take the day off. But the questions raised by the women's movements whirred around her mind. Why were young men taking home higher wages than her when her job was no less physically strenuous? My mother, who was 28 and worked in a dairy, had to use all her negotiation skills to convince her boss, a hard-working woman in her 50s, that they should leave work. When my mother dropped by her boss's flat to persuade her to come to a rally that had been organised in downtown Reykjavik, she was assuaging her guilt from skiving off work by baking furiously.

In Reykjavik an estimated 25,000 women gathered to listen to speeches, sing and discuss matters – an astonishing number considering that Iceland's population was then just under 220,000. The women were from all walks of life, young and old, grannies and schoolgirls; some wore their uniforms from work, others had dressed up. "It was the real grassroots," recalls Elin Olafsdottir, who was 45 and later represented the Women's Alliance on the Reykjavik city council. "It was, in all seriousness, a quiet revolution." It was this sense of togetherness, the calm and quiet determination, that most women remember from that day. Gerdur Steinthorsdottir, then a 31-year-old student at the University of Iceland and now a

teacher, helped organise the rally. She claims the participation was so widespread because women from all the political parties and the unions felt able to work together, and make it happen.

The atmosphere at the rally was incredible. Sigrun Bjornsdottir was a student of 19 and had just found out she was pregnant. It was a difficult time, she remembers, but being part of the rally made her feel that she was connected to a bigger force – empowered. Meanwhile, 21-year-old Gudrun Jonsdottir stood in the crowd, quietly crying. She could not believe that an old family friend, Adalheidur Bjarnfredsdottir, was going to be one of the rally's main speakers. She represented Sokn, the trade union for the lowest paid women in Iceland. Reading her first public speech now sends a chill down the spine. "Men have governed the world since time immemorial and what has the world been like?" she asked in her deep, gravelly voice. Answering herself, she described a world soaked in blood, an earth polluted and exploited to the point of ruin. A description that seems truer now than ever.

Iceland's men were barely coping. Most employers did not make a fuss of the women disappearing but rather tried to prepare for the influx of overexcited youngsters who would have to accompany their fathers to work. Some went out to buy sweets and gathered pencils and papers in a bid to keep the children occupied. Sausages, the favourite ready meal of the time, sold out in supermarkets and many husbands ended up bribing older children to look after their younger siblings. Schools, shops, nurseries, fish factories and other institutions had to shut down or run at half-capacity.

The women responsible for setting Morgunbladid, one of Iceland's main newspapers, returned Cinderella-like to work at midnight. The paper was half its normal size the next day and contained only articles about the strike. The bank tellers who saw their positions filled by male superiors took special pleasure in going to the bank and keeping them busy. It was a moment of truth for many fathers who were exhausted at the end of the day. Not surprisingly this day was later referred to by them as "the long Friday".

But what did Icelandic women gain by all this? For many it was a wake-up call. I, like many women of my generation, became a feminist that day at the ripe old age of 11 – despite being left at home alone with my nine-year-old sister, furious at being forbidden from attending the rally. It was a spur to action and many feel that the solidarity women showed that day paved the way for the election five years later of Vigdis Finnbogadottir, the world's first democratically elected female president. Finnbogadottir firmly believes that too. "After October 24, women thought it was time a woman became president," she says. "The finger was pointed at me and I accepted the challenge."

But 30 years later there is also a feeling of disillusionment. Bjornsdottir, the pregnant college girl who now handles PR for the educational sector of the City of Reykjavik, is sad that her daughter has not benefited more from what happened. A statistic much flaunted these days is that Icelandic women earn on average only 64.15% of men's wages. And so next Monday, on the rally's 30th anniversary, women are being encouraged to leave work at 2.08pm, the time by which they would have earned their pay if they they were earning the

**The day the women went on strike.** *The Guardian* 18.Oct.05

same as men. They plan to raid their kitchens beforehand and bring pans and pots to work, bang them together and make as much noise as possible. Whether the authorities will hear remains to be seen.