

ANNA KORTELAJNEN:

Leading stars – Finland's first Women Leaders

SUMMARY

In Finland, we often connect our first female leaders to the period after the Second World War or to the last few decades, but in fact Finland has had numerous female leaders for already two centuries. Eventhough painted portraits of them are hardly ever found hanging on the meeting room walls of supervisory boards, women have played an important role in the early economic life of our country, starting from the time of autonomy and in the first decades of our independence. Finnish women were granted suffrage already 100 years ago. The first women leaders were owners of trading firms, managers of factories or small and big companies, ship-owners, heads of influential non-governmental organisations and national movements as well as charismatic specialists. They have left lasting marks to the Finnish society and business environment.

Who were these women? How did they manage to make their way to the top, to the positions of leadership at the time when under law women were considered under-aged and general attitude was contemptuous? Significant number of these women were widows and single parents, many also unmarried, so they knew how to manage on their own.

How were they able to combine work and family? How did they perceive their occupations, responsibilities and their leadership positions at the time? We can find elements behind the colourful stories that can be easily recognised by a modern woman: the leading stars networked with each other and they got energy from the pleasure of working. Having occupations and tasks combined with responsibilities was a great passion for many. They also had a mission to mobilise especially women into the working life and tended to have very active roles in the Finnish society.

The report looks into the lives of numerous forerunners for today's leaders such as the ship owner Marie Hackman from Viaborg, shopkeeper Minna Canth, the manager of company Eva Ahlström, manager of department store Aline Grönberg, business woman Hella Wuolijoki and theatre manager Mia Backman. We have to understand the historical context in order to understand and analyse women's role in Finland today. This knowledge will hopefully also help in creating visions for the future.

The report studies Finland and the Finnish society from a new perspective that takes into account the work of female entrepreneurs, leaders and investors. This makes the report also a portrait of Finnish business life, and a story of progress and equality regardless of the origins – a heritage that we have not noticed, but from which we can be proud of.