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Women's Mission Groups as Religious Entrepreneurs in International Network Building

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The story of women's mission groups in Norway during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is an amazing story. It is a story about women who were part of a historical context that both in theory and practice took it for granted that the place of women was in the home. In that context, women were in principle to be defined in relation to the men they were connected to – husbands, fathers, or brothers. But this is a story about women who, by strong efforts, gradually forced their way into an independent place and role in the public sphere, and who by the end of the century ended up, not only as full voting members of their movement, but also with a firm economic grip of it. The story of women's mission groups is the story about the first, the biggest, and in sociological terms the most representative of the Norwegian women's movements. Although the liberation of women was not a pronounced issue on their agenda, in their activities and in the thinking these groups came to stand for, they acted as distinguished and influential agents for change in the view and role of women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Norway.

In this article we will focus on four points. First we will give a general outlook on the status of women in religious movements and in the society at large in Norway around the year 1840. Second, we will present a sketch of the wildfire-like growth of the movement during the subsequent decades, up to the turn of the century. Third, we will render a brief outline of the actual doings of the organised women's groups exemplified by women's mission groups in rural Årdal and the city of Stavanger. And finally, we will draw up some perspectives on the elements of an international sister-fellowship that arose within the movement and their 1904 claim for full voting membership within the Norwegian Missionary Society, a decade before the same was achieved on the political level.

The general status of Norwegian women around the year 1840

In Norway, as in the rest of Europe, the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars was a time of considerable political, social and ideological turbulence. However, unlike most of Europe the restoration brought about by the peace Treaty of Versailles in 1816 did not re-establish the old political and social order nor stability in the country. The war period brought an abrupt end to Danish supremacy in 1814, although Norway was brought into a political union with Sweden only a few months later. However, the relationship with Sweden was different. It was more of a proper union of two separate realms, united under a common king and with a common foreign policy, but with two separate national assemblies. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century the old nobility-like aristocracy that had dominated the country during the eighteenth century lost its power and a new class of parvenu producers, traders and businessmen sprang forth and created a strong and dominating bourgeoisie. Together with the class of officials – clergymen, magistrates, and higher officers – they were strongly nationalistic in orientation and they continued to applaud the ideals from the French revolution of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*.

These ideals also implied a change in the view on the status of women, although only gradually and not in a very straight forward manner. The so-called Haugian movement was the first of the lay-dominated revivalist movements that would become a characteristic feature of nineteenth century Norwegian religious life. From its very beginning around the turn of the century, women were entrusted as leaders, preachers and spiritual advisors in the Haugian movement. On a list set up by Hans Nielsen Hauge, the founder of the movement, as early as in 1802, six of thirty people regarded as leaders within the movement were women.

When the interest for foreign missions emerged in Norway during the 1820s and 1830s the Haugian movement constituted an important part of its platform. However, at this stage the former up-start Haugians had become more established and most often second generation affiliates seemed to have fit well into the arising class of the liberally oriented bourgeoisie who, in principle, shared the egalitarian ideas of everybody's equal right to positions, progress and success. But when it came to the role of women

they took a step backwards, as compared to the attitudes of their first generation Haugian parents.

Within the other of the two lay-dominant groups behind the Norwegian missionary movement, the Moravians – or The Society of Brethren as it was called in Norway – the female element was also striking, but only in terms of relative numbers, not in terms of influential positions such as preachers and leaders. The Norwegian branch of the Moravians never became a popular movement in the proper sense of the word. They mostly recruited their followers from the old privileged classes and they led their religious life within the so-called conventicles. These were smaller groups of individuals who shared the same views and who came together for prayer and personal edification. Within these groups, some of the rather independent women from wealthy families did play an active role, although always – at least formally – under the supervision of a male figure.

Before we proceed to the next point we must, however, note that neither of the two revivalist movements challenged the existence of the established church and they continued to define their activities within the formal apparatus of this church. In fact, the revivalist movement leaders admonished the followers to be diligent churchgoers. What they organised was a supplement, rather than an alternative, to the established church. However, in most of the sparsely populated Norwegian rural areas, where regular church services were arranged perhaps only every sixth or seventh Sunday, such a need for a supplement was certainly most relevant.

The Growth of the Movement

The first Norwegian groups organised by and for women to support Christian overseas mission occurred well before the founding of the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) in 1842. The first known case was a group of approximately ten women in the city of Trondhjem, who in 1826 began a series of weekly meetings in support of the Basel Mission.¹ Also, the Moravian women established separate women's mission groups in a few places during the late 1830s. The proceeds of their activities were sent to

¹ E. Danbolt, *Misjonstankens gjennombrudd i Norge*, Oslo 1947, p. 202, T. Jørgensen, "De første 100 år", in T. Jørgensen (ed.) *I tro og tjeneste: Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842-1992*, Stavanger 1992, Vol. I p. 77.

the Moravian mission centres in Denmark and Germany. These initiatives, however, never grew into anything more than scattered, small-scaled attempts and they do not deserve the label of a 'movement'.

The establishment of the Norwegian Missionary Society did not give any immediate impetus to a quick growth of the female initiative. The more progressive attitudes that made themselves felt in the revivalist groups and in the society in general during the previous decades, seemed to have been subdued in favour of other concerns. Nevertheless, the first elected board of commissioners in the new organisation was not more conservative, for in their first annual report they addressed themselves especially to women through an open appeal. On the model of similar initiatives known in Germany and Britain they encouraged Norwegian women to "... convene in particular committees for women with the particular aim of working for the education of women in the heathen world".² These groups were described as "... working fellowships that by needlework contribute their mite to the mission".³

But around the country, this appeal was looked upon as highly controversial. Reports came in from different parts of the country about women who were denied by their husbands to attend meetings in the women's groups. Some even had to put up with scornful words and small stones being thrown at them when they were on their way to the meetings.⁴ Or as one of them put it: "How much resistance we have met, how much mockery and contempt. Often these sisters convene in tears because family and friends exasperate at our meetings."⁵

However, during the 1840s and 1850s, the existence and activities of the women's mission groups gradually became socially acceptable to all classes and throughout the country. Two women had an important hand in this: Gustava Kielland and Henriette Gislesen. Both were wives of ministers in the established church and members of the then dominant social class of higher civil servants. They had different personal type however: Kielland was open and industrious, while Gislesen was more reserved with prayer

² *NMS Aarsberetning* [Annual Report] 1(1843)26.

³ *NMS Aarsberetning* [Annual Report], 1(1843)26.

⁴ K.F. Tjelle, "Kvinder hjælper Kvinder": *Misjonskvinneforenings-bevegelsen i Norge 1860-1910*, Oslo 1990, pp. 164f.

⁵ *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* 2(1885)Vol. 3, p. 22.

and Bible-reading as her great interest. In different ways, the two stand out as the two major entrepreneurs in the women's missionary movement. Both started women's groups in their private homes. These came to be seen as models for similar groups elsewhere.⁶ Gustava Kielland's group was organised as a working-fellowship in which the members kept their hands busy with carding, spinning and sewing while someone was reading aloud from the Bible or from the missionary magazine, *Norsk Missions Tidende*, which was founded in 1845. In Henriette Gislesen's group greater stress was laid on reading and prayer. It seems that the vision of a heartfelt sister fellowship, which later became so important, had its hotbed here. Later in the century, Kielland and Gislesen were, not without reason, frequently referred to as the Mary and Martha models of the movement.⁷

The main element in the general missionary movement during the 1840s and 1850s, however, was the growth in number of regular mission groups led by men, but in which women could also participate. The growth in numbers of separate groups for women was still slow during this initial period of the NMS's activities. In the year 1865 the number of regular mission groups for the whole country was 600, whereas the number of women's groups had risen to about 300.

But in the years to follow, the women's movement witnessed an enormous increase in numbers. New groups sprang up in one new place after the other, whereas the number of regular groups levelled off. In 1882 the proportional figure 2:1 from 1865 was turned upside down with the women's groups counting 1,650 and the ordinary groups 830. Three years later, the proportion increased to 3:1 in favour of the women's groups. The growth continued rapidly up to the turn of the century when the number reached 3,500 women's groups.⁸ It is impossible to estimate the exact total number of women participating in the groups, but when the movement reached its peak in the early 1950s, with more than 5,000 groups, it has been estimated that approximately 120,000 women took part. As an illustration of the geographical distribution of the movement, it can be mentioned that at that time there was not one single school district in the whole country without one or more women's groups working for the Norwegian Missionary

⁶ K.F. Tjelle, 1990, pp. 135f.

⁷ *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* 5(1888)Vol. 1, p. 8.

⁸ T. Jørgensen, 1992, p. 78.

Society. In addition were the women's groups connected to other missionary agencies and free churches.

There is ample archival evidence of statements from women about the importance that these groups played for those who participated in these groups and their motivation to attend them. The existence of a particular fellowship for women first of all represented a novelty in itself. It functioned both as a spiritual and social fellowship, for it was a place where one could "... laugh, joke, and talk in earnest, all according to circumstances".⁹ Another formulated that it was a place in which "... thoughts were drawn away from daily toil, and raised to an interest for something above daily matters."¹⁰ Or, as it was described by one of the women leaders in the early 1890's:

To many a lonesome woman in the countryside, the women's mission group has been the means for her to keep her spiritual life going, and to grant her the necessary help so that she does not go spiritually to rack and ruin in daily struggle.¹¹

A brief look at other, contemporary organisations working for women's interests, gives a good indication of the relative importance of the women's mission movement. The Norwegian Union for the Emancipation of Women, established in 1884, which was the organisation that most specifically had the promotion of women's interests on their programme, never reached more than 500 to 600 members. The Union for Voting Rights for Women had, at its height in 1906, about 2,500 members. More successful was the female branch of the labour movement, The Women's League of The Labour Party, established in 1901, which counted approximately 25,000 members in 1940. The only women's movement that finally matched the women's mission movement in numbers was *Norske Kvinnens Sanitetsforening*, a union which provided non-professional care for the sick and convalescent, with about 200,000 members in 1946, and with 1,000 organised groups. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century the network of women's mission groups in Norway was the pervasively dominant women's movement throughout the country. Its widespread influence lasted up to the 1950s and 1960s, and is still important.

⁹ *Maanedsskrift for Missionsvenner* (1845) Vol. 11, p. 175.

¹⁰ *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* 9(1892) Vol. 6, p. 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also K.F. Tjelle, 1990, p. 141.

Actual Activity of the Groups

It is of interest within this context to also present a closer picture of the actual activities of the women's mission groups and the links that existed between them. We will exemplify this by focusing on two particular groups: one in rural Årdal and the other in the city of Stavanger.

Årdal is a small place in the Ryfylke fjord near Stavanger on the Norwegian west-coast. It is scattered with farms and in the latter part of the nineteenth century was populated by approximately 250 households of small-farmers and their tenants. The centre of the district was the general store on the quay. No representative from the civil service lived in Årdal. People lived off of farming, sheep-breeding and fishing, but mostly combined of the three. Unfortunately there are no member-lists preserved from the five women's mission groups that existed in Årdal between 1860 and 1900. Fifty-eight women have been identified as active in the movement through other means of identification. The number was probably higher.

Differences between rich and poor in this community certainly existed, but were not so great. The women's groups included members of all classes with a predominance of people from the more well-off families. Each member seems to have contributed what she could. When the sheep lambed in the spring, one or two were set aside as mission-lambs from which the profit from wool and meat was sent to the mission. The same was the case with portions of the fields. The husbands set aside fishing nets in a similar manner, and in this way, also used the women's groups as a channel to contribute to the mission. During the monthly meetings, the groups of women produced knitting wool and knitted clothes that were brought to the annual autumn market in the city of Stavanger and sold for the benefit of the mission.

And here comes an interesting point: Among the customers in Stavanger were many members of the women's mission groups from that city. For instance, Dina Jonassen counted no less than 120 ladies convening once a month in her spacious house. These mission women of the city paid for the products sold in the market place from the women of Årdal and similar countryside mission groups. The amounts collected went unabridged to the mission as the goods had been produced on a voluntary basis. The city-women then brought the products into their group. They were further treated

into more refined products and sold at a higher price at their great Christmas bazaar in early December. Again, the entire profit went to the mission. Thus, what appears from this network of women's groups in work for the mission is a peculiar female chain of production and trade with some amount of a VAT drawn to the mission at every link.

The Women's Groups in a Wider International and Societal Perspective

Both in Årdal and Stavanger, however, the main concentration points were principally the same: personal edification, social fellowship, and information about and care for the overseas mission. In 1884, the women's groups started their own monthly magazine, *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* (Mission Reading for Women's Groups). It was initiated and edited by Bolette Gjør, one of the central figures in the movement. Through this magazine, and through the reports from missionary women sent to the magazine from Zululand and Madagascar, a window was opened to a much wider international fellowship that counted not only the members of her own group or other women's groups in Norway. Rather, it also included the so-called "working sisters" on other continents, i.e. the female missionaries, and, as they then put it "the sisters out there" or "the sisters from the heathen world".

The reports from abroad could be very detailed and personal, rendering all sorts of private information about named "heathen" and "converted" women in difficult circumstances. Such reports about the destinies of African and Malagasy women suffering from poverty or struggling with sick children and the brutal men or fathers pressing them into unwanted marriages, were in this way put onto the tables of the Norwegian mission women, who in many cases, did not have more than what they needed for their own daily sustenance. Most of these letters were written by the "working sisters", but many also from the "sisters out there". These letters aroused enormous interest and concern.

Never before in history had women in Norwegian local communities – in towns, valleys, and islands - experienced anything like the close, personal fellowship they came to feel with the many named and unnamed Zulu and Malagasy women they read about in these letters and in the missionary magazine. Letters, as well as different kinds of financial gift support,

including goods, were sent to the missionary headquarters in Stavanger and transmitted to the Zulu and Malagasy addressees as a direct result of this fellowship. Letters of reply came back. In this way, quite strong and historically new networks arose between the women of local communities in Africa and Norway. On this point, the mission women represented an international avant-garde movement. Participation in this fellowship opened a new horizon for thousands of women without formal education, increased their knowledge, and gave them a feeling of being an important link in a bigger, global context. This is illustrated in a letter from a women's mission group in a "mountain village", printed in the women's missionary magazine, in 1884, which read:

We do feel lovingly united with all the mission sisters here at home, with all the serving sisters, who driven by the love of Jesus Christ have left the country where their cradle stood, the home of the happy days of their childhood, to go under the cross in trouble to fight the good struggle among the heathens, and with the crowd of heathen sisters, both those who by the Gospel have been liberated from the powers of darkness, and those who still walk in the shadows of darkness and death.¹²

Despite their increased numbers and proportional importance in the economic basis of the missionary society – in the year 1900 the mission women provided nearly 80% of the society's income – the women's groups were not yet formally integrated into the organisation. Similarly, their influence on the boards at different levels was only an indirect one.

In the same manner as they had forced their way into the public sphere during the 1840s and 1850s, the mission women claimed their natural right for influence around the turn of the century. Of course, the issue had doctrinal as well as sociological implications. Many of the more high church oriented ministers of the Church of Norway warned against the claim. The main stream of both the clergy and the lay supporters of the Norwegian Missionary Society, however, were at the time more evangelical in their orientation, and thus the majority of the main board of the society did not house theological obligations against it. In addition, the actual economical power of the women could not be neglected; for mere hints from the women leaders that their support might be shared with other agencies was serious enough economic menace in the eyes of the male leaders of the society.

¹² *Missionlæsning for Kvindeforeninger* 1(1884)No 11, p. 82.

The issue of the right for women delegates to vote and to be elected into different positions within the organisation was presented to the NMS general assembly in 1904. It was approved by a large majority.¹³ It is of interest to note that this event took place nine years before Norwegian women were allowed to vote in political elections, which took place in 1913. Together with the more profiled, but smaller organised units for the liberation of women, the much more widespread and numerous women's group connected to the mission, played an important role in the process leading up to the 1913-resolution by rooting it in a broad popular movement.

¹³ See K.F. Tjelle, 1990, pp. 160-86, and T. Jørgensen, 1992, pp. 80f.