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**Floor Scrubs,  
Electric Heaters,  
Danish Magazines,  
and other  
Revolutionary Items**

**A qualitative research  
into the lives of three modern Icelandic women**

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## **Abstract**

This research focuses on the lives of three Icelandic women born early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim of this study was to try to understand how these women viewed their life and how they experienced the changes that Icelandic society has undergone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The women are viewed as active agents that shaped their own lives but also had to live within material and social constraints. The narratives in this project are not meant to represent the lives of all Icelandic women from this period, but rather to provide accounts of women's experiences of everyday life in the beginning of the 20th century. The concepts, space, modernity and technological change, are used as guidelines for analyzing the interviews and are also the stepping stones in building a theoretical base for this research. The concept of social space points to the space these women had to act, work and live in. How these women negotiated their living space is of special interest in the analysis. Modernity is an important issue in the study because these women's lives span almost the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century which was a time of rapid modernization in Iceland. The analysis focuses on how the women participated in Iceland's modernization and how they became modern. The third theme of this study, technological change, is also interconnected with Iceland's modernization. The study's focus is mainly on domestic technology because that is the type of technology that has most affected women's daily lives and work environment. The subjects were all very different characters and had diverse views of their lives. Poor living standards and the subordination of women however set their mark on all these women's lives and in one way or another limited their living space.

## **Keywords**

Women, Space, Modernity, Technology, Oral History, Iceland.

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## **1. Introduction**

Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that floor scrubs, electric heaters and Danish magazines are revolutionary items. The general consensus would probably agree that these three things are rather trivial if one looks at the grand scheme. This research is however not directed towards investigating the grand scheme, it focuses on the lives of three Icelandic women born early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and for these three women floor scrubs, electric heaters and Danish magazines were very important items.

The initial idea for this project was to research the rapid modernization of Icelandic society in the 20th century from a personal and every-day-life perspective. Iceland's modernization has most commonly been researched in a broad range, macro level, so I thought it was time to take on this subject on a micro scale. To make things even more interesting I decided the informants should be strictly female. My informants should also be quite old, preferably older than ninety years of age. Their memory may therefore date back to the early days of industrialization in Iceland. When the three women I chose as subjects for this research had been interviewed I realized that the focus of the project had to be modified. Iceland's rapid modernization which had been my initial focal point just wasn't as interesting as the women themselves, their views, their stories and how their daily lives have changed since they were young. The interviews were so full of surprising perspectives and the women were all such different characters with such varied experiences that I felt I was forced to change my focus. From then on the three women I had interviewed were no longer simply informants but became central to the project. Iceland's modernization fell into the background and my aim became to try and understand what it was these women were telling me.

I was searching for the women's perspectives on the changes in Icelandic society when I was interviewing and how these changes affected their daily life. I did not prepare specific questions but rather tried to make the interview resemble more a free-flowing conversation so the interviews are inevitably chaotic and span a wide range of subjects. After looking carefully at the interviews I chose three loose themes or rather three concepts that I could use as tools to help structure the analysis of these wonderfully messy interviews. The concept of modernity was an obvious choice for a theme as it was so connected to the original idea of looking at Iceland's modernization. However the focus was now on how the women became modern, not the country. Another quite obvious theme was technological change, partly because I had been interested in hearing

their views on technological change when I did the interviews but also because this subject interested the women and seemed to be important to them when I brought it up. My focus will be on the kind of technology which has been especially significant to women because it has been an integrated part of women's daily lives. This is of course domestic technology. The final theme that I selected from the interviews is the concept of space. It didn't come to me until the interviewing was over, but the concept is however a very practical tool for understanding, comparing and analyzing peoples lives. I will try to map these women's social space, how they negotiated their living space and also if they in any way tried to expand it.

The structure of the study is conventional, I will begin by explaining my theoretical standpoint, which I divide into three chapters where each chapter focuses on one of the concepts I chose as guidelines for analyzing the interviews; space, modernity and technological change. The reason I put the discussions of the concepts in this order is because the space concept is the most open of these three concepts and invites a more general discussion of women's lives. The concept of modernity points to a more specific discussion than space so it narrows the field slightly. Technological change is the last in the discussion because it is within the modernization process and therefore narrows the field even further. The next chapter, the Women and the Interviews, will explain my methods; how I chose my subjects, and how the interviews were conducted. In that chapter I will also introduce the subjects one by one and give an overview of their life. The analysis is next and it is also divided into discussions of the three themes, space modernity and technological change.

The questions I seek to answer with this research are first of all, what these women expected from life, what were their ambitions and their options and did they in any way manage to negotiate their space to get what they wanted out of life. Secondly I wish to understand in what way they have taken part in Iceland's modernization, how they became modern. My third research question is how do these women perceive the rapid changes in technology they have seen and taken part in, during their lifetime, do they believe they are for the better or do they feel nostalgic towards the way things were when they were young.

## **2. Theoretical Standpoint**

The theoretical background of this research is in the field of gender studies. There is not one specific theoretical standpoint but rather an eclectic approach, as is often the case with research in gender studies. The three concepts I chose as guidelines for analyzing the interviews, space, modernity and technological change, will also be the stepping stones in building a theoretical base for this research.

### **2.1. Women and Space**

People live in both time and space and people's space changes through time. The women I interviewed had lived for more than ninety years and during that time there were great changes in the society. The concept of social space is quite an open theme. It points to the space these women had to act, work and live in. Space can be a handy tool when one is researching people's lives because one can map their lives and examine which paths were open to them and which were closed. It is also interesting to see how people negotiate their space, often people accept the limits that are put on their social space but some try and go around them somehow and others plainly defy the limits that are placed on them. In this chapter I wish to explore the most dominant discourses on womanhood in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These discourses framed the early years of my subjects' lives and should give some idea of what was expected of them as young women. I also wish to briefly look at what possibilities were open to young women in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on a strictly material level. This discussion should give a general idea of the space of young women in this era lived in and the social and material restrictions set on their space.

Within the span of one century there have been enormous changes in Icelandic society. Iceland was industrialized later than most of its neighboring countries. It is a very isolated country geographically and that, along with the fact that it was a poverty stricken Danish dependency up until 1944, has often caused Iceland to lag behind. There is not a lot of research on women's gender roles in Iceland but generally it seems that the changes in the space of Icelandic women have developed in a similar fashion as in the neighboring

countries, although in Iceland the changes may have occurred a little later and have possibly developed more rapidly.<sup>1</sup>

It is widely acknowledged within the field of gender studies that after the industrial revolution work became separate from the home, the men became providers and women stayed at home. The roles of men and women became more distinctly different.<sup>2</sup> The Icelandic historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has questioned why women's role did not become more versatile in the modern industrialized society. She even claims that in many ways women's role was even more restricted than it was before.<sup>3</sup> The difference between the pre-industrial discourse on womanhood and the post-industrial discourse was that the modern, urban, post-industrial discourse focused on an essential intrinsic difference between female and male nature while in the old agricultural society the differences between the sexes were just the product of their dissimilar social roles. For the few women that did manage to set themselves apart and exercise some kind of power it was not thought of as against their nature.<sup>4</sup> That is to say that in the pre-industrial society the differences in the sexes were mainly just thought to be the product of their dissimilar social roles whereas the post-industrial discourse turned it around by awarding the sexes dissimilar social roles because they had such different natures. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir says the emphasis on a different female and male nature was perhaps a reason or a justification for keeping women in the private sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Another Icelandic historian Sigríður K. Thorgrímsdóttir says that by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was almost wholly accepted that women's first and true obligation was tending the home as housewives and mothers. Women could not be whole without a husband and they were defined by their connection to other people, mostly a husband.<sup>6</sup> The most obvious example of this is how women were defined by their husband's profession, a girl could become a fisherman's wife, a farmer's wife, a minister's madam and so on but they could rarely hope for a profession of their own. The general view was that women should only work outside the home if it was absolutely necessary. Sigríður K. Thorgrímsdóttir says that working outside of the home was only acceptable if a woman was forced because of poverty or if she did not manage to find a husband to provide for

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<sup>1</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2002), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2002), Cohan, R.S. (1983) and others.

<sup>3</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2002), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2002), p. 40 and Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2002), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Sigríður K. Thorgrímsdóttir (2002), p. 62.

her.<sup>7</sup> Women's wages were so low in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that they were hardly enough to support one person; in 1937 a woman's monthly pay in a factory was 150 kronur while the men's pay was 300 kronur.<sup>8</sup> In a very interesting study of 16 Icelandic women and their relations to the British and American soldiers, one of the women describes women's work conditions in the years 1917-1920. She says that women were often not far from being slaves to the people they worked for, for instance they could be sent out to work other jobs perhaps down at the docks or curing fish. The money they earned would however not benefit them because it went straight to their masters pockets and they only got their regular monthly pay that was usually five kronur.<sup>9</sup> Young women often worked backbreaking jobs for a very lousy pay, before they got married. It seems that marriage was the only chance they had to make a good life for themselves.

Thankfully Iceland did not miss out on the women's movement and the fight for equal rights. After Icelandic women had secured the right to public office in 1911 and the full right to vote and stand for election to parliament in 1915 the emphasis of the women's movement seemed to shift towards a more ideological debate on femininity and women's role. In the 20's and 30's there was a lively public debate on the position of women. Women within the more radical side of the women's movement protested that women's only role in society was to stay at home and rear children. They felt that women had a lot more to offer and they, just like the men, should be able to choose a profession according to their talents and interests.<sup>10</sup> However there were also women who felt that women's increasing participation in public life could have disastrous effects. Sigrún Blöndal, head mistress of the homemaking school in Hallormstadir and the aunt of Anna (one of the subjects in this research) discusses in what ways too much education can be dangerous to women in an article from 1926:

Not only do educated women have fewer children and most likely not well behaved, but experience also teaches us that their children have a frailer structure. It seems that great mental strain is unnatural to women and causes abnormalities! This is manifested in different ways, but the clearest and most painful example is the fact that these women do not produce enough milk, sometimes none. It is also manifested as a fatigue that weakens the nervous system and the child can inherit this weakness.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sigríður K. Thorgrímsdóttir (2002), pp. 54-55.

<sup>8</sup> Herdís Helgadóttir (2001), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Herdís Helgadóttir (2001), p. 21

<sup>10</sup> Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, (1928), p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Sigrún P. Blöndal (1926), p. 114. In my translation.



Sigrún is herself well educated. In the article which she calls “The Nature and Role of Women” she quotes Darwin and John Stuart Mill and many others. She talks knowingly of ancient Egyptian culture, the Roman empire, the enlightenment and the industrial revolution. She even uses concepts like positivism, realism and sociology. Still she claims that women can not handle education. Sigrún’s quotes here above may seem foreign to people today and it is tempting to write her off. However it does seem that she is against women’s subordination although she believes women to be of a totally different nature from men.

The women interviewed for this research were growing up and coming of age in the midst of this ideological conflict on women’s role. These discourses I have discussed above probably had an influence on my subjects and shaped their lives in one way or another. Our lives are however not only shaped by external factors. How each woman dealt with their environment also affected their social space. People are not puppets of hegemonic discourses no matter how dominant they may be. People participate in creating the social space which they live in, and they have agency to change, protest and defy their social surroundings or to accept them.<sup>12</sup> In my analysis of the interviews I tried to seek out what these women expected from life, their ambitions and their options and if they in any way managed to get what they wanted out of life. Had they in any way rebelled and if so, what did they rebel against?

## 2.2. Women and Modernity

During the first two decades of the century there ruled a strong determination for progress and spokesmen for investment by foreign business interests and for large scale projects were predominant in public discussions. There was a technical revolution in the fishing industry at this time, an industry which played the largest part in the development of a modern society in Iceland. The supporters of the fishing industry were full of self-confidence and harshly criticized the countries badly developed farming system... Spokesmen for the farmers were also influenced by the belief in progress and wanted to ensure a similar development in agriculture as in the fishing industry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hulda Proppé (2004).

<sup>13</sup> Ólafur Ásgeirsson (1988), p. 149 (abstract in English).

Modernization is a male project. From this short description of Iceland's modernization it can be read between the lines that women had little to do with modernization. Women were rarely spokesmen for large scale projects or for the farmers and fishing industry. Women and modernity is however the second theme that I extracted from the interviews. In this chapter I will discuss in short the wrestle between the ideology that promoted a modern progressive Iceland and the conservative ideology that fought to hold on to the traditional Iceland. The main focus is however on how Icelandic women became modern.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was fierce debate on whether modernization would be a blessing for the Icelandic nation or if it would be the road to corruption and decadence.<sup>14</sup> Anne McClintock put forth the theory that women were made a symbol for the past and as such became the nation's connection to its traditions, while men were the embodiment of modernity and progress:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic 'body' of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive or revolutionary principle of discontinuity.<sup>15</sup>

This ideological gender difference made it possible to harmonize the nation's desire for both being a modern nation and holding on to the past traditions; women were the connection to the past and men to the future.

In the 20's there emerged a new kind of womanhood and it spread all through the western world. In England they were called "flappers," "boyettes" or "modern girls."<sup>16</sup> In Iceland this new woman was mostly found in the nation's capital and was generally referred to as 'the Reykjavík girl' or 'the new woman'.<sup>17</sup> These women dressed in boyish fashions, cut their hair short, drove cars, sat in cafés and pursued an active lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> The image of this new woman was quite the opposite of the traditional Icelandic image of



'Fjallkonan'  
'The Icelandic mountain woman'

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<sup>14</sup> Sigríður Matíasdóttir (2004), p. 246.

<sup>15</sup> McClintock, A. (1993), p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Kent, S.K. (1999), p. 287.

<sup>17</sup> Guðjón Fridriksson (1994) and Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2004), p. 256 and Kent, S.K. (1999), p. 287

women ‘the mountain woman’ that had been fiercely promoted in Iceland’s struggle for independence from the Danish kingdom.

In the summer of 1925 a young Icelandic writer named Halldór Laxness wrote an article in the defense of this ‘modern woman’. Laxness was by then fairly well known in Iceland but later he would become a Nobel Prize winner and the personification of Iceland’s modernization. The article was titled (in my translation) *The Icelandic Woman and the Boyish Haircut* and it caused quite a stir.<sup>19</sup> In the authors biography by Halldór Gudmundsson it says that Laxness thought it to be his duty to scold the Icelandic nation for being out of touch and to bring the nation up to date with this article<sup>20</sup>. In the article Laxness stressed that the boyish hairstyle that was then becoming fashionable among young Icelandic women was “an outer symbol of the modern woman’s new mentality”.<sup>21</sup> He made a great distinction between the views of the young and the old; I hope my translation of this paragraph does justice to the edge in Laxness’s words:

The past raised woman to become a procreating machine so when man built himself a home she would be the most important furniture. After the wedding she was stuck at home; and while the husband went about doing work for the good of the nation she would dust the furniture, ignorant, hysterical and pregnant.<sup>22</sup>

Laxness says that the backward thinkers accuse modern women of abandoning her rightful place within the home, instead she has taken up manly interests such as politics, science and art; she smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol and debates with her fellow men and invites them to restaurants and cinema shows. He stated that there was great opposition against the shorthaired women and the new camaraderie between men and women. However it was his opinion that “the modern woman, a thinking creature in an educated society, can not be satisfied by pouring all her energy into rearing children”.<sup>23</sup>

Laxness’s article is undeniably radical; it is even a little stirring for a contemporary woman such as me. It is no surprise that the article got a lot of negative response, especially from proud housewives. Guðrún Lárusdóttir, a member of parliament, wrote a short commentary on Laxness’s article a few days later. She strongly opposed his idea that children should be reared by professionals and not by just any woman that in one way or another has been driven into marriage, like Laxness had so

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<sup>19</sup> Halldór Gudmundsson (2004), pp. 177-184 and Halldór Laxness (1925), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Halldór Gudmundsson (2004), p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Halldór Laxness (1925), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Halldór Laxness (1925), p. 6. In my translation.

<sup>23</sup> Halldór Laxness (1925), p. 5.

tastefully put it. Guðrún stated that “the unspoiled women of this country would not give up their holy rights of motherly love so easily”.<sup>24</sup> In Laxness’s biography it says that Laxness brushed all the criticism off by stating that his critics did not know what was going on in the world. Laxness wanted to wake the Icelandic nation up from the numbness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

The 20’s and 30’s were lively times. A touch of moral panic gripped the western countries with the emerging of ‘the new woman’ and newspapers and magazines were ridden with debates on woman’s behavior. Although it is very interesting to analyze the discourses of this time Birgitte Sjøland points out, in the introduction to her study of Danish women that came of age in this period, that discourse analysis does not tell us much about women’s actual lives. She says:

Surely, the ‘Modern Woman’ -the scantily clad, sexually liberated, economically independent, self reliant female- was a rhetorical construction, the quintessential symbol of a world in disarray. But ‘modern women’ -women who cut their hair, wore short skirts, worked for wages, and enjoyed themselves outside the home- were not just figments of anxious imaginations.<sup>26</sup>

By solely looking at the discourses of the 20’s and the 30’s it is easy to see only the golden twenties that turned gender relation on it’s head and liberated women. This is however just a myth. If we examine women’s actual lives it is clear that women were still severely subordinated. Birgitte Sjøland does however hint that this period did bring on a real change in women’s behavior and transformed many patterns of daily life.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the emerging of this “modern woman” in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Icelanders still uphold the image of ‘the Icelandic mountain woman’ from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The national costume for women is widespread and popular while Icelanders have a very vague idea of the men’s traditional outfit. Generally men wear the international tuxedo to synchronize with the women’s national costume or an outfit that was designed a few years ago and advertised as the traditional outfit for men. Today womanhood is still more connected to the past and traditions, and masculinity is more influenced by modern individualism. In my analysis I will try to place the women within this debate; in what way they participated in Iceland’s modernization and how they became modern.

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<sup>24</sup> Guðrún Lárusdóttir (1925), p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson (2004), pp. 180-181.

<sup>26</sup> Sjøland, B. (2000), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Sjøland, B. (2000), p. 7-8.

### 2.3. Women and Technological Change

Technological advancement in the home changed a lot regarding women's space because changes in domestic technology changed women's daily environment and their work routine. Technological advancement has been an integrated part of modernization; it is also connected to how women became modern. Like modernization, technology is not neutral, it is a male project. Men have almost exclusively had the education and the power to shape technological advancement<sup>28</sup> throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and according to Engels possibly as far back as the bronze-age.<sup>29</sup> Domestic technology is a strange cross between the male and female domain. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was almost exclusively created by men and almost exclusively used by women.

Domestic technology is an important field to research. Still it sometimes seems that people have a blind spot for this subject. When we think of the technological advancement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we tend to picture in our minds microchips, satellites or artificial intelligence. We tend to forget the technological products of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we use the most in our daily lives, like coffee machines and refrigerators. Cynthia Cockburn is one of the key scholars in the field of feminist technology studies and she has put forth the questions: is technology shaped by gender? Cockburn's answer is that that artifacts and forms of knowledge associated with women are often simply not regarded as technology.<sup>30</sup> Cockburn has a wide definition of technology that she bases on the *Oxford Shorter English Dictionary*, she says:

Cooking with a wooden spoon or a microwave, sweeping with a broom or a vacuum cleaner, it is all doing, making, and producing. And that is what technology is: that which pertains to the "practical and industrial arts".<sup>31</sup>

Technology that is within the sphere of women tends to become invisible and is not regarded as technology at all so women's association with technology becomes invisible. These mundane things are perhaps the technologies that have most affected people's lives without us realizing it.

Feminist technology studies have often focused on the question of whether technology can increase women's freedom or if it is too integrated with male dominance. The most influential feminist scholars in this field have been rather negative towards

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<sup>28</sup> MacKenzie, D. and Wajcman, J. (1999) and Cockburn, C. (1992).

<sup>29</sup> Coole, D. H. (1988), p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Cockburn, C. (1985), and MacKenzie, D. and Wajcman, J. (1999), p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Cockburn, C. (1997), p. 361.

technology. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Cynthia Cockburn and others have questioned the proclaimed labor saving of domestic appliances for housewives. Cowan's noted book *More Work for Mother* is about the changes in household technology on women's domestic work load over the past 200 years. Previous studies on housework had shown that women still spent an enormous amount of time doing housework and men didn't. Advertisers and manufactures of appliances had relentlessly promoted new and new labor saving technologies for the hole of the 20th century but women workload still proved to be endless. In *More Work for Mother* Cowan argues that there has not been such a dramatic change in the role of housewives as often is implied; before industrialization women fed, clothed, and nursed their family members and in the post-industrial age women still fed, clothed, and nursed their family members. Cowan doesn't mention theories of patriarchy or women's oppression, she just shows in a very clear way how the technological changes of industrialization have benefited men and relived them from tasks they used to perform giving them a greater chance to seek paid employment, while women's domestic work load has not diminished that much in spite all the new labor saving technology of the home.<sup>32</sup> Langdon Winner is also skeptical of the so called "time-saving" devises:

The relentless introduction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of "time-saving" devices has encouraged us to think we could be liberated from toil, freed to pursue more creative work, peaceful reflection, more enjoyable sociability. These dreams have been inevitably frustrated. Our available time expands into a space of congestion –increasing frenetic interactions encouraged by our machines. Although we save time we have not been clever enough to bank it.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than freeing women from boring and time consuming housework, it seems that labor saving technology has only increased the tempo of women's lives. Mostly this is because the standards are always getting higher; the time that is 'saved' is only filled with new chores, causing women to feel stressed and guilty.

Cowan and Cockburn and many other feminist's in the field of technology studies tend to be negative regarding the possibility that technology might liberate women. They are quite unanimous in thinking that advances in domestic technology have not freed women from boring and time-consuming housework. Whether or not my subjects agree will be discussed in the analysis.

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<sup>32</sup> Cowan R.S. (1983) and Cowan R.S. (1985).

<sup>33</sup> Winner, L. (1994), p. 194.

When the subjects of this study were growing up Iceland was still very poor and underdeveloped. Iceland however industrialized very rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that is why it is so interesting to seek these women's perspective on technological changes and how they affected their daily lives. Are they negative towards the change and nostalgic about the way things were in their youth or did they welcome the technology with open arms?

### **3. The Women and the Interviews**

#### **3.1. The Interviews**

To gather information for this project I chose to take interviews with Icelandic women that are born early in 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a kind of oral history project. Feminists embraced oral history as a method of research because it offered the chance to explore the lives of the women that had hitherto been neglected. It also offered a way of integrating women into scholarship. The oral history method fit well with the second wave feminist ideal that knowledge should spring from experience. Joan Sangster highlights this in her article on feminist debate on oral history:

Many of us originally turned to oral history as a methodology with the radical and democratic potential to reclaim the history of ordinary people and raise working-class and women's consciousness. As feminists, we hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history "for women" emerging from the actual lived experiences of women.<sup>34</sup>

The narratives in this project are not meant to represent the lives of all Icelandic women from this period, but rather to provide accounts of women's experiences of every day life in the beginning of the 20th century.

In selecting women to interview my main aim was that they should be as old as possible so their memory may date as far back as possible. However it was important that the women I interview still show no signs of dementia. This made it impossible for me to select my informants randomly, for instance from the national registry. I therefore adopted a kind of snowball method and began by looking for informants in my nearest

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<sup>34</sup> Sangster, J. (1994), p. 11.

vicinity. I started by interviewing my great grandmother because I knew that she was still in good health. Then I turned to my friends and family members and asked them if they could point out possible subjects to me. I asked almost everyone I know if they knew a woman that was preferably past 90 years of age and was still in fairly good health both mentally and physically. If someone could name a woman that fit the description I usually asked them a few basic questions about the woman's life and personality, for instance, where she is from and if she is open and talkative or shy. Then I would use this person as my advocate in setting up an interview. I found that using a mutual friend to get in touch with my subjects helped me a great deal. It was helpful to use the mediator to inform the women of whom I was and why I wanted to interview them because the women were sometimes a bit hard of hearing and difficult to communicate with at first. I also think it built trust between me and the women to have someone they knew introduce me.

Joan Sangster, who I mentioned above, is wary of the tendency of treating oral history as a "purer version of the past, coming unadulterated from the very people who experienced it." She says that this approach disregards the process by which the researcher and subject create the interview together.<sup>35</sup> I believe that it is very important that the researcher be aware that he shapes the interview; he asks the questions and therefore directs the subject in certain directions and the subject may possibly give answers according to what he thinks the interviewer is looking for. Even though the researcher may let his subject ramble quite freely, he ultimately decides what bits he uses from the interview. Researchers must be aware that they are in a position of power. They have the power to interpret the dialog. With this power comes the responsibility to interpret correctly and fairly and avoid the temptation of sensationalizing to get more interesting results in their research. My personal connection with the interviewed was helpful to me in building trust and communication with the elderly women but it may also have made my subjects especially vulnerable to exploitation on my behalf. On the hand this personal connection does possibly make me feel more accountable for what I write about these women than if I knew that I would never see them again.

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<sup>35</sup> Sangster, J. (1994), p. 7.



These interviews will be my main source material but I will also use a variety of other source material to back up the interviews. In addition to taking interviews I also asked my subjects if they could show me some old photographs or maybe journals or other autobiographical material. Looking through old photo albums with the women was very interesting, the discussions around the pictures were less formal and more directed by the women themselves than me. The pictures also helped to refresh their memory and often gave me a better understanding of the women's lives. Hopefully the pictures displayed in this essay may help the readers to a better understanding as well.

Asking for journals and autobiographical material only proved successful in one case, but the one woman that did have something for me had a lot; two published books, one with poems and the other with short autobiographical memories from her childhood. She also had a full drawer of handwritten papers with more poems, stories and memories which she let me select from and proved to be very useful.

The interviews with the three women took place in July 2004, September 2005 and November 2005. Each interview was around ninety minutes long and always took place in my subjects' living room and was recorded on a digital recorder. I didn't prepare specific questions for the interviews but I had thought of a structure or some loose themes as a guiding light. Usually I began each interview by asking them to describe their life story with a focus on their youth and early womanhood. From there I tried to extract from them what they thought was important, what they felt had changed the most in their lifespan. My aim was to try to understand how they viewed their life and how they experienced the changes that Icelandic society has undergone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 3.2. Introducing the Women

### 3.2.1. Gudrún Kristín Ingvarsdóttir



My first subject, Gudrún Kristín Ingvarsdóttir, is also my great grandmother on my mother's side. She was born in 1907 and at the time of the interview she was 97 years old. My great grandmother lived in the south of Iceland in a fishing village on Vestmanna-islands. It was quite difficult to convince her to let me interview her. I talked to her a couple of times on the phone, stated as clearly as I could what my research was about and asked her politely to participate, but she never gave me a definite answer. Finally one Saturday morning in July I packed an overnight bag and took a three hour boat trip to the islands. That afternoon I invited myself to tea at her house and brought along with me, for support, my three native cousins, who I was staying with. While eating cake and sipping coke I carefully asked her again if she would let me interview her but like before she said she couldn't remember anything and had nothing interesting to say. I was about to give up when my eighteen year old cousin told her that this was not a problem, she could just lie if she didn't remember something. We all laughed and finally she agreed to let me interview her.

Guadrún was born and raised in Iceland's capital city, Reykjavík. She was the eighth child in a group of eleven brothers and sisters. Her father died when she was seven years old. At that time five of the siblings were still not confirmed but the older ones went to work to help support the family.

In the beginning of the year 1928 she married my great grandfather Jónas, who was a captain on a fishing boat. She moved with him to his hometown, the Vestmanna-islands. Guadrún had five children, three girls born 1928, 1930, 1932 and two boys born 1934 and 1940. With only two years between each child, except between the youngest, one can imagine that these years must have been busy. Guadrún also partly raised her grandchild who was born in 1946.

During her child rearing years Gudrún did some seasonal work outside of the home but it wasn't until after the children had gone from home that Gudrún started working regularly. First she had a part time job curing fish for a few years but in 1960 she and her husband moved into the children's school in which her husband became a janitor and she engaged herself in cleaning. They lived in the school for the next 20 years until Jónas dies in 1980. Since then Gudrún lived in a small apartment in the Vestmanna-islands. Gudrún passed away on the 26th of March 2005 after a short illness.

### 3.2.2. Hlíf Gestsdóttir



Hlíf is my friend's grandmother. I had often heard my friend talk of her grandmother with great fondness so when I started looking for subjects to interview Hlíf quickly came to mind. I asked my friend to be my advocate in setting up an interview and Hlíf turned out to be both willing and able. On the day the interview took place my friend and Hlíf had gone shopping for a new vacuum cleaner. I met up with them at Hlíf's apartment and we all sat down to chat. When we had become fairly comfortable I asked if I could turn on the recorder and start the interview. My friend was present at first, she even took part in the conversation, but after a while she went into the kitchen to put the vacuum cleaner together. My friends presence made the interview more relaxed, made it seem more like a cozy conversation than an interview between total strangers.

Hlíf was born in 1915 and raised in the north of Iceland. Her parents were farmers and Hlíf is the oldest of five siblings, three girls and two boys. As a child she looked after her siblings quite a lot because she was the oldest. Her younger brother had weak lungs and she had to take good care of him. She went to school when she was ten years old, until then she had been taught at home. When she was fourteen her schooling was over. She desperately wanted to study more but it wasn't possible.

Hlíf moved to Reykjavik in 1936 when she got married and has lived there since. For a short period during World War II she moved with her three children back north to Svarfadardal because it was recommended to take children out of Reykjavík. Her husband was a truck driver and during this time he got a job in the north-east. Hlíf and her husband had two more children after the war, five in all. Around 1960 Hlíf started working in a store. Her five children were mostly grown up and she probably had more spare time. She found herself a job in one of Iceland's first supermarkets, where the customer walked around and serviced themselves. Hlíf is a widow now and lives on her own in Reykjavík.

### 3.2.3. Anna Thorsteinsdóttir



Anna is my great grandmother's sister's daughter which means that Anna and my father's father are cousins. My grandparents on my father's side referred her to me when I asked them for help in finding subjects for this research and Anna was very interested in helping me. She herself has written a great deal about her own life; she has published two books, one poem collection and one with short narratives for children of animals that she has known. When I interviewed her she gave me quite a few papers both typed and handwritten with poems, autobiographical notes and a few speeches and lectures she has given for various occasions. Anna also gave me a fifteen page interview with her mother taken at least 30 years ago by the founder of the Icelandic women's history museum. Many of these papers proved to be very useful.

Anna is born 1915 and raised in east Iceland; the family had a farm in a small fjord called Stöðvarfjörður. Anna's parents were both educated, her father had a shipping operation for a time but when Anna was born he had become a farmer. He was also district counsel chairman for 18 years. Anna grew up with five brothers, she had an older sister but she was living with Anna's grandparents. Shortly after Anna had finished the final examination she went to live for one year with Guttormur Pálsson, my great

grandfather. He had just lost his wife and their four children were still quite young. My grandfather, the youngest, was only five years old. During the years 1931-1936 Anna worked at the home of Sigrún and Benedikt Blöndal. Sigrún was then the headmistress of the school of homemaking in Hallormstadir and Anna studied there for two years. In 1936 Anna became sick with tuberculosis and went to a sanatorium in the south. At the age of 29, in 1944, Anna got married to Kristinn Hóseasson. A few years later they moved to Heydalir which is in Stöðvarfjörður, near the place where she grew up. They lived in Heydalir for nearly forty years, Kristinn served as minister and Anna taught children. Anna and Kristinn adopted two children born 1953 and 1955. Anna now lives in Reykjavík with her husband.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1. Space**

Anna talks of her childhood with great fondness, both in the two books she has published and in the interview. She spent much time outdoors with her brothers and seems to have had a lot of free time. Growing up as the only girl among five brothers, she felt some resentment for the differential treatment she got. She remembers clearly how her brothers were always told to look after her when they were going out, while she on the other hand was supposed to serve and help them. Anna says that the constant lecturing that she needed looking after gave her a feeling of inferiority and definitely decreased her self esteem.

The most material difference in Anna's upbringing as opposed to her brothers' upbringing regarded her clothes. She wore high socks like her brother but she was supposed to be nicer dressed so hers were made from much finer yarn and were not as warm as her brothers' socks so she sometimes got chilblains from the cold. She was not supposed to wear trousers, although her mother did let her sometimes wear short trousers underneath her skirt on the coldest days, but it was very important that nobody saw them. The boys were better dressed to protect them from the cold and never got chilblains like Anna who always had bad feet because of the chilblains.

As a child Anna had a strong sense that she should get equal treatment to her brothers and it obviously hurt her when she felt she got differential treatment. She did however say that as a child she misjudged her grandmother. Her father's mother was living with the family and Anna thought that she gave her brothers preferential treatment. Anna thought she liked them better because she was always giving them new socks and such. Later Anna realized that it was her grandmother's job to serve and help the boys while a woman named Helga was to help the womenfolk in the family. Young Anna didn't realize that there was a division of labor between Helga and her grandmother and thought that she was being left out.

Gudrún lost her father when she was seven years old. Her family had a hard time after her father passed away and they had to struggle to make ends meet. Until the 30's it was common for families that lost the father to dissolve. The mother would then often hire herself in service and possibly take the youngest child with her, while the other children became paupers and were sent to live with other families. Gudrún says that her mother was not a woman that could bring herself to seek help from the authorities so they just tried to get by on their own and thankfully the family did not dissolve. Gudrún speaks of this in a resigned and careless manner which I believe is typical of Icelandic people when they talk of their hardships.

Hlíf spoke of her childhood with great fondness, however, she and I were conversing about her childhood in a chatty and easy manner, when I ask her what plans she had for the future as a child and suddenly Hlíf's manner changes. Her expression becomes pensive and grave and then she mumbles absent mindedly: "yes, there were so many dreams; however they couldn't all be achieved." Then she states more assertively, but still in a serious manner:



Bakkagerdi  
The farm where Hlíf grew up

First and foremost I wanted to go to school, I didn't want anything else. There wasn't the opportunity... I never spoke of this with anyone, but everybody else was talking about it, but we just couldn't afford it.... I wanted to go to high school, I wanted to go to university, or I don't know what I wanted I just wanted to learn.

She had such a strong desire for learning and going to school. She probably realized that it wasn't an option so she never voiced her wishes. The people around had clearly seen that she had a talent for learning and had discussed the fact that she should get a further education. Her family could however by no means afford sending her to school and nearly eighty years later it still saddened her that she didn't have an opportunity to get an education.

I ask Hlíf if she never thought of going to the homemaking schools, but she shakes her head and says it was the same thing with them, it cost too much for her family. Plus she says that she wasn't really interested in going to a homemaking school and probably wouldn't have gone if it had been an option. My friend then voices her agreement wholeheartedly and we all laugh. The gloomy atmosphere is gone.

Regarding her education, Guðrún says: "I didn't get any further education; it was not customary that everyone went to school, only people of good means could manage that." I seems like Guðrún did not fret too much about not being able to get a further education after the mandatory schooling, it just wasn't a possibility.



Anna and her younger brothers

Anna's father and mother were both well educated, Anna's mother was home schooled but she had obviously had a strong interest in learning and at a young age she was helping her father, who was a minister, with his teaching. Anna was mostly home schooled although she took examinations with the children in a near by town. When Anna was eleven some boys in the town, that were two or three years older than her were making fun of her younger brother for being behind in his studies. Anna got so mad she jumped on them and beat them with all her might. Their teasing affected her so that she decided to demonstrate that the children from the country weren't stupid and the next winter she took the final

examination at the age of twelve when fourteen was the normal age. In this picture, on the left, Anna is at the age of twelve and stands with her two very innocent looking younger brothers. She reminds me a little of the character Anne of Green Gables from L. M. Montgomery's story. There is a glint of proud stubbornness in her expression.

Anna studied at the homemaking school in Hallormstadir and says it exceeded the other "porridge-schools," (as Anna calls them) because it was two years instead of just one year and included a lot more book learning. Anna was obviously more interested in the book learning. She says that Sigrún Blöndal the headmistress, was bent on making her a weaving teacher but that was not to her liking.

Anna always wanted to get a good education and she did get an education she believes, by reading educating books. For instance she says she never felt left out or uninformed when she is among educated people. However, Anna says: "the problem with self-education is that it's hard to make use of it". Although she doesn't see herself as uneducated Anna obviously feels some regret for not being able to go to school to get a degree.

A good education was hard to come by for women in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it just wasn't profitable for families to educate their daughters when they had such little opportunity to utilize that education. Women like Anna and Hlíf that showed great interest in learning simply didn't have the option to get a degree although people around them recognized their talent for studying. Women like Anna and Guðrídur, Anna's mother, that were from well educated families, could acquire knowledge and educate themselves so as to give them certain status but it was still not an education they could utilize in a practical way.

Anna claims she was always more interested in learning than in getting a husband. Anna got married at the age of twenty-nine and says that she had become quite hopeless of getting a husband. She says she just had her mind on studying and saw boys more as mates and never imagined that they could be smitten with her. Even though Anna claims she was not that interested in husband hunting it is clear that Anna did not want to remain single, that was not a good option at the time. It also strikes me that Anna should already feel like an old maid at the age of twenty-nine, I myself will be twenty-nine in a few months and feel slightly offended by the idea of being considered an old maid at that age. I really wish however that the modern consensus was that women were not old maids at the age of twenty nine (or any age for that matter), but I fear many women's magazines,



and television show's like *Sex and the City* prove that this discourse is still alive and well.

Anna says she usually felt more comfortable in a group of boys rather than with her own sex and realized this even better after she became a minister's wife; after mass she would serve coffee, and like so often the men grouped on one side and the women on the other. She was of course supposed to mingle with the women rather than the men but often she forgot and suddenly realized she had not talked with the women<sup>36</sup> at all and forced herself to speak with them. It is clear that Anna knew her place as the wife of the minister and that she was expected to chat with the women of the parish after mass, still she was just more at home chatting with the men and had to force herself to speak with the women.

Anna was clearly not that interested in doing what was expected of her, that is: finding a husband and being a good housewife. Her ambitions pointed more in the direction of getting an education and being taken seriously. She did however know the importance of finding a husband, because the option of being single was probably not feasible for a woman in those days.

Opposed to Anna, Guðrún and Hlíf married quite young, both in their twenty first year. In 1928 Guðrún gets married and moves to the Vestmanna-islands. This was a bit of a shock for her because the Vestmanna-islands is a small place compared to Reykjavík:

Yes it was a big change for me at first but my in-laws were such good people, they took me as one of their own... I naturally missed a lot from Reykjavík, both my friends and my siblings and then of course more time past between visits. Once eight years passed before I returned to the mainland. One was just tied up over children and family and couldn't do anything and there was a lot more work for housewives in those days.



An overview of the harbour in the Vestmanislands

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<sup>36</sup> She actually calls the women *kerlingar* which is hard to translate to English, maybe old hens would be the best term. I think *kerlingar* is *käringer* in Swedish.

There has always been trouble with transportation between Vestmanna-islands and the mainland so the island was and still is quite isolated. When Guðrún states that she was always tied up and couldn't do anything she hints at the isolation of the home. Later in the interview when we talk of the radio the hint of isolation pops up again:

It was so amiable when it came (the radio), people didn't go out so much to have fun as.., though people did go out now and then it wasn't as if they were totally isolated.

Like so many women from her generation Guðrún talks fondly of the radio. The oldest Icelandic woman said on her 109 birthday in February 2006 that she thought the radio was the greatest technological advancement of her lifetime<sup>37</sup>, and another housewife said she would rather give up the first bearing sheep from the farm than the radio from the shelf. A possible explanation of the popularity of the radio among these women is that it broke the edge off the isolation of the home.

Hlíf met her husband while she was still living in the north with her family. In 1936 they got married and she moved with him to Reykjavík. This was during the depression and there was little work to have Hlíf says that people thought the best chances of finding work would be in Reykjavík although there was still a lot of unemployment there too. Hlíf claims she liked Reykjavík fairly well; she didn't know many people and she was a bit lonely. She had never been to Reykjavík before because the trip took three or four days by ship. She didn't go back north until years later when the war started.

Hlíf and Guðrún both moved to a totally new environment when they got married and both of them hint at the isolation they felt. This isolation mostly stems from the fact that they were a long way from their family and childhood friends but it may also be because being a housewife with many children to care for means you are stuck at home most of the time and out of touch with the public sphere, leaving women with the feeling of being isolated from the outside world.

Gender discrimination and poverty were the predominant factors in limiting these women's options, for instance in getting a good education. The three women however dealt with this in very different ways; Anna managed to take a back route to education, the formal road to higher education was closed to her so she just became her own teacher and educated her self. Anna does however regret not being able to utilize her education in

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<sup>37</sup> Gudfinna Einarsdóttir (2006).

a practical way. Gudrún seems to have accepted the fact that she couldn't get a further education, it just wasn't a possibility and perhaps she had other ambitions. Hlíf, who wanted to study so desperately, still felt hurt and regretful over not having the option to get an education in her youth. It does however seem that Hlíf did not have great expectations that her dream would come true because she never voiced her wishes; she probably knew it wasn't an option.

Marriage was a given necessity. Hlíf and Gudrún both married rather young and marriage was a great leap because they moved to a whole new environment. They both hint at the isolation of the home because they were a long way from their childhood home and tied up over children and the housework. For Gudrún it was a bit of a shock because she didn't know how to keep a home and had to learn everything from her in laws. Anna had some difficulties in conforming, she got married late, she had other ambitions than finding a husband and being a good housewife, she did however not want to remain single her whole life and claims she had become quite worried at the age of 29. Perhaps one of the reasons that Anna managed to educate herself is because she didn't start a family until quite late, she didn't marry until she was 29 and didn't adopt her children until she had been married many years so she probably just had more free time on her hands.



Gudrún with her oldest child Inga most likely in 1929

## 4.2. Modernity

The years between the wars were difficult years economically for Iceland as elsewhere. Guðrún says that in 1930 the price of fish dropped and the depression began. For a place like the Vestmana-islands, which was solely built on the fishing industry, this meant trouble. Guðrún was always strategizing to earn more. She congratulates herself on being a tough bargainer when she was once trying to sell a load of puffin feathers to a pillow maker in Reykjavík: “she tried to bargain the price down but I was stubborn as a mule.” Then she laughs loudly.

Guðrún and Jónas probably were better off than many; I doubt that she thought of herself as poor even though someone like me that has grown up with all the modern comforts would see them as desperately poor. When I and my grandmother discussed the people that came to work for them during the fishing season (January to May) it became apparent that my understanding of poor and rich does not apply to these times:

Guðrún: I always had a girl during the fishing season, extremely nice girl from Stokkseyri, that was very good at cooking, she was a total dream, was with us for four years...just came with the season fishermen.

Thóra: Did you pay her anything?

Guðrún: Now that was lousy pay my dear Thóra, a maids monthly pay was 30 kronur per month then, can you imagine.

Thóra: I don't understand amounts like that.<sup>38</sup>

Guðrún: No, nobody understands. No one can understand except they have gone through it themselves, even though you try to explain...you were thought to be wealthy if you could just let the children go to the cinema on Sundays and that cost 25 aura, yes thank you.

Thóra: And could you let your children go to the cinema?

Guðrún: Yes we tried to allow them that.

Hlíf is fifteen when the depression hits Iceland and poverty clearly limited Hlíf's options. When she talks of her marriage and moving to Reykjavík she mentions that this was in the depression and it was hard to find work, Hlíf is married in 1936 so the depression is obviously still in full swing six years later. In fact Hlíf says later in the interview that things don't really start improving until after Second World War starts.

The war did wonders for the Icelandic economy, the British army came to Reykjavík, there was enough work for everybody and people's living standards improved enormously. Hlíf says that the war changed everything, people had it so much better, and

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<sup>38</sup> In Iceland today you couldn't buy a pack of gum for 30 kr.

it turned everything around. She says that there wasn't much change in the quality of living during the lifespan of her grandparent's and her mother because by then people had gotten out of the worst poverty: "...my grandparent's were not desperately poor, they were seamen and fished the sea and worked the land and started buying machinery..." Her grandparent's were of a generation that got out of the worst poverty, but Hlíf says the quality of living was improving slowly until the Second World War; Then there is a dramatic change.

Hlíf's parent's were born 1894 so they were quite young when she was born. Hlíf says that they were part of the youth movement<sup>39</sup>. These youth movements were associations of men and women from ages of 14-35 and most of them were founded around the turn of the century. They were grass root movements, quite nationalistic and aimed to foster independent, energetic and venturous young Icelanders that would initiate progress in the society. Just like Laxness their goal was to wake the Icelandic nation up from the numbness of the past centuries.<sup>40</sup> Hlíf says her parent's were full of the spirit of this movement; Says "they wanted to improve life and improve the land." She says there was such a spirit of working together that the youth movements in her community managed to build a swimming pool almost entirely on voluntary work. Hlíf says she practically grew up in the youth movement, she and the children in her community founded their own children's league and held their own meetings and made elaborate plans for the future.<sup>41</sup>

It seems to me that Hlíf grew up in an environment of progressive ideas and initiative; she says jokingly that if her grandfather heard that there was a new agricultural device on the market then he bought it on the spot. Hlíf herself obviously had her mind on the future "There were so many dreams" Hlíf said sadly "however they couldn't all be achieved."

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<sup>39</sup> Danish word for this movement is Ungdomarbejde.

<sup>40</sup> Sesselja Gudmunda Magnúsdóttir (1997), p. 14-15.

<sup>41</sup> Hlíf told me that some of the minutes from their meetings had been found a few years ago. It would have been interesting to look at them, but they are in the North of Iceland and not easily accessible.



Hlíf with her family at her grandparent's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary  
Hlíf is in the middle row on the far right

Hlíf did not want to be old-fashioned or traditional. When she shows me the picture of her grandparent's fifty year wedding anniversary she points out the fact that she is not wearing a women's traditional costume. She says that everything was changing in those years and she has never cared for the traditional costume and never owned one. In her mind that was only for old women. Today young women as well as the older women dress in the traditional costume on special occasions. Many women have perhaps inherited a traditional costume from their grandmother, others take sewing classes and learn how to make their own costume. It's a nice custom and for some a hobby. Hlíf most likely grew up too close to this custom in time; she was striving to become modern and did not want to be associated with this old fashioned uniform.



Anna in a traditional costume  
outside her tent in Hallormastadur

This picture of Anna is taken in the summer of 1930 when Anna is fifteen, at that time she was living with my grandfather and his family and she slept in a tent by the river during the summer months. In the picture Anna wears the traditional costume proudly; there has perhaps been some kind of party or festival that day. Anna seems to have little interest in talking about fashion. When I ask her about the costume she is wearing in this picture and the clothes she wore on

a daily basis she trails off to another subject after telling me a little about the clothes she wore as a child that I discussed in the chapter before. Anna was traditional and did not take part in the fashion trend that shocked the nation in the 20's when she was as a teenager. Later the modern style gradually took over and she accepted it as most other people.

As a young woman in Reykjavík Guðrún cut her hair short. She says that was the newest thing back then. This new trend was not well received by everyone: “I remember when I came home and my brother Árni saw me and the words he let out of his mouth.” Her brother was clearly not happy with the change but his reaction didn't bother her. Guðrún told me that once she even teased her family by taking the long braid that had been cut off and pinned it to her head and then strutted around asking if they would like to see a well haired woman.

When she came to the Vestmanna-islands, she had short hair like all the girls in Reykjavík but in the Vestmanna-islands it caused a lot of talk. Guðrún told me that their neighbor was asked if she had seen Jónas's new girlfriend and what she looked like. The neighbor replied: ‘she was cut’ and Guðrún says it was like saying: ‘she was a prostitute from Reykjavík.’ Guðrún is clearly entertained while she is recalling the uproar she caused when she first came to the islands. The Vestmanna-islands had a population of 3380 people in 1930. Reykjavík was definitely not a large city at that time with a population of 33854<sup>42</sup> but it was still more modern and more in touch with the outside world. Guðrún was a young lady from Reykjavík of the 1920's and though Reykjavík was a small town and relatively isolated, women in Reykjavik still had some idea of what was in fashion in Denmark. Young women in Reykjavik were cutting their hair and wearing shorter and looser dresses than before. Guðrún says that when she moved to Vestmanna-islands there were little means to follow the fashion, no hairdresser or Danish fashion magazines, no chance to get modern dress designs that were in fashion. As the town grew, this all changed but when she first came her look caused a lot of talk. She tells me about an old lady that was very religious:

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<sup>42</sup> Hagstofa Íslands (2006).

Once she was talking about how young women paint their faces to much, which I don't recall them doing, maybe some powder and a little lipstick but nothing around the eyes or eyebrows...well once I said so the old lady could hear: 'I can tell you: It's more likely that I would forget to put on my shoes than paint my face' I just said it to shock her, you see, I usually just went about the way I was made, without painting my face. I mostly just painted it when I went to the movies or to a dance.

Guðrún clearly wasn't doing anything extreme with her looks (in today's standards at least) however I believe she quite enjoyed shocking the old bag by exaggerating her frivolousness. She was probably proud of being a modern girl and felt no need to impress fanatic old ladies.

Guðrún took full part in this trend that caused such a moral panic that Halldór Laxness felt obligated to defend it publicly. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir deliberates that this modern fashion and lifestyle wasn't such a grave threat to the traditional power structure as the public discussion of these years indicates, it did perhaps bring young women some independence but as the playwright Guðmundur Kamban wrote about in 1929 the Reykjavík girl was not prominent in the public arena, "she is not involved in journalism, she does not sit classes in the university and rarely participates in scientific research."<sup>43</sup> The fashion trend alone could not bring women into the public sphere on a snap of ones fingers. This trend did however give young women a chance to behave more freely, speak their mind, defy the traditional ideals of femininity and claim to be modern.



Guðrún with her sister Guðmunda  
both looking very smart

Anna was perhaps not perceptible to the fashion and lifestyle of the modern woman (we must also bear in mind that Anna lived in the country and was very far from Reykjavík) but she was very inclined to make herself heard and demanded to be taken seriously. The way Anna describes herself as a young woman it seems that it was very important for her to be equal to men. Men were her mates and she loved to talk about politics. She felt that she was their equal intellectually so she expected to be treated the same and like I mentioned above it hurt her if she was treated differently than her

<sup>43</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2004), p. 260.



brothers. Anna did perhaps not bare it on the outside that she was a modern woman; she had little interest in fashion and had nothing against wearing traditional clothes. However, her ambitions to get an education, her perception of herself as the equal of any men and how freely she expressed her opinions bears witness that Anna was modern in thought and this way of thinking could be a serious threat to the traditional power structure.

Hlíf and Guðrún both bore it on the outside that they were modern women, Hlíf was raised in an environment of hopefulness towards the future and initiative to modernize. Hlíf saw herself as a modern woman and refused to wear the traditional outfit because she thought it to be old fashioned. Guðrún was modern girl from Reykjavík and took full part in the fashion trend that shocked the ‘backward thinkers’ like Laxness named them. Guðrún seems to have enjoyed the talk she caused when she moved to the vestmannislands with her short hair and open, artless manner, she even exaggerated her frivolousness to shock a fanatic old lady. Anna had little interest in discussing fashion and it seems she did not take part in this modern girl trend, she wore the traditional costume proudly as a young woman. Anna was however quite modern in thought, she expected to be treated equally to her brothers, she felt a camaraderie with men, enjoyed debating about politics and demanded to be taken seriously.

### 4.3. Technological Change

My grandfathers sister past away in 2003, she was an extremely likable person and not surprisingly quite a few people sent obituaries to the morning paper. In one of these obituaries, her daughter in-law mentioned that my aunt had often spoken of how difficult it must be to be a young woman today. My aunt said that:

Even though she didn't have all these helpful home-appliances when she was a young housewife, her sphere of work was more specific; back then women's duties were not so divided between their work, education and home.<sup>44</sup>

This comment from my aunt's obituary is the spark that kindled this research; I realized how interesting it could be to inquire after the perspectives of women that had lived the enormous transformations that Iceland has gone through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When I first

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<sup>44</sup> Adalbjörg Ólafsdóttir (2003). In my translation.

read my aunts comment it quite shocked me that she could feel sorry for us modern women, who have so much more opportunities than women of her generation had. However it is true that many modern women are having difficulties in balancing a full time work with a family life so her comment did in some way ring true in my ears. My aunt with her ninety years of experience saw that it is not doing modern women very good to be so divided between so many roles. Though she indicates that being a housewife without all the helpful home-appliances we have today was not easy.

When I question Hlíf on what she thinks has changed the most since she was young, she says “well just about everything” however she gives me an example and quite surprisingly the example is of how she washed the floor. I had not asked her about domestic labor or technology, I asked the question quite out of the blue when there came a pause in the conversation after we had been talking about her husband’s job. It surprised me that she should pick this topic on her own when I had been planning on discussing domestic labor later in the interview. For me this verified that changes in domestic technology is a very heartfelt subject for women of her age.

Floor cleaning could at first seem like such a small insignificant thing, but as she described the technique for washing floors when she was young I realized what a gruesome, backbreaking task it must have been. The house she grew up in had unvarnished wooden floors like so

many houses and the floors were supposed to be as white as possible. To get that effect the floors were scrubbed with warm water, a coarse rag and sand from the shore and of course Hlíf had to scrub the floors on her knees. As I laugh with disbelief, Hlíf says with emphasis, that this is



Hlíf with her arms around some friends

the worst task she has ever had to do. When Hlíf moved to Reykjavík and started her own family the floor cleaning got easier, the floors were made from better materials and she could buy helpful devices such as brooms and scrubs and soap.

Twenty years old Gudrún starts to keep her own home: “I never would have thought I could do it” she says and at first I thought it was strange that my great grandmother who I always knew as such a perfect housewife had once been so uncertain of herself, but later when she has described her daily chores I realize that being a housewife demanded a lot of specialized knowledge. Gudrún says she learned everything from her husband’s sisters, she had to learn how to clean and cook puffins, make horse sausages and so on, “and there were no stores to buy things like nowadays” she says almost accusingly.

I ask Gudrún to tell me about her daily chores. She tells me about how she washed the clothes in her hands from rainwater. She tells me that she aired the furniture when the weather was dry and carried everything outside and beat the dust out. She told me what she cooked and how she stored the food and she even described how she made nice dresses from wheat bags for the children and herself. The reoccurring theme in all her descriptions is that keeping a home cost a lot of effort and strain. Quite a few times she implies that this or that job was difficult, when she describes it, although she never plainly says it, but three times during the interview Gudrún says outright that housework was very difficult, for instance when she says: “one was just tied up over children and family and couldn’t do anything and there was a lot more work for housewives then compared to housewives today”

When I question Hlíf about her daily chores she also speaks of how difficult being a housewife was. Hlíf didn’t get a washing machine until 1955 or ’56 and her youngest child is born in 1949 so she washed everything in her hands when the children were little. Hlíf says washing clothes was total drudgery, “wringing all the bed linen dry; that was a lot of work!” she says with emphasis.

Anna describes her daily chores in a lecture she held a few years ago for a congregation meeting. In 1947 Anna and her husband moved to Heydalir “There we lived for almost fourty years, a time of great change in society”. Anna says that when they first came to Heydalir there had passed five years since the last minister had lived there so a lot of work had to be done to fix the place. Anna had both her mother and Helga who had worked for her parent’s for 35 years, to help her. The well was dry and the water pump wasn’t working, the outhouse had blown away, the heating kettle was broken so they couldn’t heat up the house and when she tried to turn on the stove it turned out to be broken too. The first years they cut the grass by hand with a scythe but in 1951 they

bought a tractor. Anna says that it was as far as they went in mechanization because by then there was a revolution in the mechanization of agriculture and they were getting older and didn't want to take part in the race. Heydalir was owned by the Icelandic Church although it was in the care of Anna and her husband so all repairs were to be paid by the Church. Anna was not happy with the Church's neglect to maintain their house. She says:

When I was the coldest, I got the idea to travel around the country and meet with ministers wives to make the suggestion that we collectively divorce our husbands, all at once, to protest the treatment we had gotten.

Anna says that their farming was never at a grand scale: "things would possibly have gone better if I had been stronger. I had tuberculosis when I was young and was never quite strong in health after that... Though our dreams did not come true, many things had been accomplished." Four years before they left Heydalir, the house was repaired and an electric heater installed, the field had also been enlarged and she was no longer carrying the laundry to the stream and washing in her hands.

The descriptions of these women's daily chores truly opened my eyes to how primitive the technology was when they were younger and how difficult the simplest chores could be. Gudrún says that the changes that she has seen are such that she can't even describe them and then she continues with great eagerness:

We didn't have washing machines, or electric mixers, no helpful aids, we did everything in our hands, we cleaned clothes on a washboard, things have developed to what they are like today from the times when we had nothing, and the development continues until one doesn't know what comes next.

Things have changed so dramatically in her lifetime that it's almost as if she can't grasp all the changes she has witnessed and what comes next she doesn't dare to predict. Although Gudrún may seem a bit baffled she never expresses any negative feelings towards these changes, she seems very content with modern life today. Gudrún believes that people today have it very good:

Yes, there was a lot of work for housewives back in those days, now everyone can work outside the home and be happy and take it easy and there are washing-up-machines<sup>45</sup> and washing machines, in the bigger homes at least, not everywhere...

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<sup>45</sup> I use the word washing-up-machine deliberately in stead of the word dishwasher because Gudrún says Thvottauppvöskunarvél when the Icelandic word is really upphvottavél.

It's hard to be negative towards advances in domestic technology after listening to my grandmothers descriptions of the backbreaking work she had to do as a housewife in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and after hearing the affection in her tone when she spoke of her first washing machine that her daughter in law gave her and served her for 36 years. Gudrún talks fondly of advances in domestic technology throughout the interview



Gudrún with Jónas on her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday

although she does seem a bit baffled sometimes. Here above she even indicates that advances in domestic technology have made it possible for women to work outside of the home and be happy and relax. This is quite contrary to both what my aunt said about modern women being divided in between their work, education and home and to the theories of many feminist writers some of which I mentioned in the chapter of

women and technology. Feminists tend to be rather negative towards technology and it's a common view that domestic technology has not freed women from their plight as they are still more bound to the private sphere of the home. However right this claim may be, it still seems to me a bit ungrateful not to give these incredible technological advances some credit for making our life easier. My aunt is not negative towards advances in technology and she is not saying that women had it better when she was young, she is just pointing out that women today don't have it so good either, because of their divided loyalties.

Hlíf's attitude towards technology is not as unblinkingly positive as Gudrún's although she is positive none the less. Hlíf says there were not many electronics when she first moved to Reykjavík; they just had an electric iron and electric lights. Washing machines, electric ovens or refrigerators weren't really attainable until after the war started, "there wasn't even enough electricity to support them" Hlíf points out. When Reykjavík got access to more electricity, Hlíf tells me there came a factory that started making electric ovens and later some refrigerators. The factory was called Rafha and sometime around 1940 Hlíf put in an order for an oven, the waiting list was so long by then that it took one or two years for her to get the oven. There was obviously a high demand for new domestic technology, which means women like Hlíf took this technology

open arms when they were put on the market. However, one of the first things that Hlíf says in the interview is that she is a technophobe. She makes the comment when I show her my very tiny brand new digital recorder which I had bought the day before and hardly new how to use. It's probably not strange that a ninety year old woman should call herself a technophobe when she is looking at a very tiny brand new digital recorder. However I did think about her comment a lot and when I put it in a broader perspective I did think it was strange. Throughout the interview Hlíf talks about how she welcomed new technology and just that very day she had bought a brand new vacuum cleaner which she was very happy with. Like most people she probably never thought of a vacuum cleaner as technology. Technology is generally just the latest high-tech toy like my very tiny brand new digital recorder and this technology that has revolutionized our daily lives such as the washing machine and the floors scrub somehow becomes invisible.

Anna expresses her view on technological change in the introduction to her poem collection. There she speculates a little about the past and the present and the changes she has experienced in her lifetime:

I am born in 1915, then the youngest of five siblings, later there came two brothers more. Now I am the only one left. My first memory is from 1918. Since then there have been enormous transformations in our society. We shall suppose that these changes are for the better. We have more interaction with other countries now and are more in touch with cultural trends from abroad. We have phones, radios and televisions in every home, but that was not the case in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Technology brings us together and creates entertainment for both children and grown ups. But when we look back, is there nothing we have forfeited? Surely there are many things to regret, such as parents being able to spend more time with their children, the family was together both in work and play, even the grandparents played along on special occasions.<sup>46</sup>

The nostalgia is very obvious in this text, she misses the old society that she grew up in and so little is left of today. She seems to question the idea that technological change is always progress; that it is always for the better. She is both positive and skeptical of the changes, there can be detected a tone of sarcasm when she says: "We shall suppose that these changes are for the better." She freely admits that technology has brought people together, connected Iceland to the world and given us entertainment, but claims that we have perhaps lost something very important along the way to prosperity. Anna is skeptical towards information technology and feels that perhaps it has interfered with the cozy evenings the family spent together when she was a child.

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<sup>46</sup> Anna Thorsteinsdóttir (2004), p. 5. In my translation.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to try to understand how these women viewed their life and how they experienced the changes that Icelandic society had undergone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I wanted to view these women as active agents that shaped their own lives but also lived within real material and social constraints. I tried to avoid fitting them into a box that made it easy to label them but instead I wanted to underline what made them special. Gudrún, Hlíf and Anna are all very different characters and have diverse views of their lives.

Gudrún seems to have embraced the changes and has no regrets for the past, though she might be a bit baffled at the speed of which everything changed. She does not complain; she speaks of her hardships in a careless manner as if it had not really been a problem to be poor and cold and overworked. I was happily surprised that Gudrún had a rebellious side; I knew she was a lively and vibrant person, but I saw a new side of my great grandmother when she describes how she brushed off all criticism for following the fashion from the Danish magazines. She even made fun of her critics for their narrow mindedness.

Hlíf does not hide the fact that she is mad at the past for not having had the option to study. Perhaps the reason she still feel this so strongly is because she did not voice her wishes at the time but kept it to herself. She was a modern woman and more than anything else she wanted to learn but for very material reasons it was not possible. Hlíf sees the advances of domestic technology in a broad context; she mentions the war as a factor in the development as well as the hydro-electric power plants. Hlíf however also expresses a very personal view of the changes. I think it is wonderful that Hlíf should take floor cleaning as an example of the greatest changes in her lifetime. It is wonderful because the floor scrub is not something you would see listed in history books as a great technological advancement and most people would agree, but it still made such a material difference in Hlíf's life. This plainly shows how male dominated the discourse on technology is and how distorted the general view of technology and progress is because it is so male centered.

Anna seems to have been more traditional than both Hlíf and Gudrún in regard to fashion. Anna has a strong connection to the past; she is interested in history and has done her own enquiries into the lives of her ancestors and the history of Heydalir, which was her home for forty years. She is also more critical of the technological changes in the

20<sup>th</sup> century, because she worries that they have ruined the intimacy of the family. Anna is however happy with the warmer houses and the improved living standards of modern society. Anna still seems to have been very modern in thought, she wanted to educate herself and she expected to be treated equally to men. She had little interest in conforming to the norms by getting married and being a good housewife, although she did not really want to rebel either. She simply had her mind on learning and debating politics rather than on romance.

The three women do of course have some similarities. They all agreed that keeping a house and rearing children was backbreaking work in their youth. Each woman especially named washing clothes as being a total drudgery before the washing machine became available. All the women are positive towards advances in domestic technology and feel that all these the appliances have made our lives easier, Anna is however a bit skeptical towards information technology.

Poor living standards and the subordination of women set a mark on all these women's lives although perhaps not in the same way. The women most likely didn't perceive themselves as poor at the time, but on modern standards they would be considered desperately poor. Even Anna's living standards would probably be thought of as dire although she was from an educated and fairly well to do family. Sometimes it is hard to see if the constraints set on the women's space stem from poverty or gender discrimination, in other words, if they are material or social. For example, none of the women get further education because it simply didn't pay off to educate women when they had such slight chances of getting a professional job. Is women's subordination the underlying reason or poverty? Most likely it is a combination of the two.

Before I conclude I feel I must once again stress my subjectivity regarding this research. I have deliberately tried to make myself visible in the text, not as an objective onlooker but as a participant in the research process. I freely mentioned my reactions and my views in the text to underline the fact that I was a contributor to the interviews and my views shaped the analysis of them. These women's stories became very dear to me during the research process. I sincerely hope that I have done justice to the lives of Anna, Guðrún and Hlíf.



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