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## **Collective Identity, Solidarity, and Sisterhood in the ASAB Cleaning Women's Strike in Sweden and the Women's Day Off in Iceland.**

Valgerður Pálmadóttir <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8163-9372> <sup>a\*</sup>

Evelina Johansson-Wilén <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4908-1783> <sup>b</sup>

Eva Schmitz <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Faculty of Philosophy, History and Archeology, Reykjavik, Iceland;*

<sup>b</sup>*School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden;*

<sup>c</sup>*School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden.*

Contact information of the corresponding author: Valgerður Pálmadóttir\*, [vap@hi.is](mailto:vap@hi.is), Öldugata 59, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland.

Biographical information about authors:

Valgerður Pálmadóttir holds a Ph.D. in History of Ideas from Umeå University (Sweden). Pálmadóttir is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of History at the University of Iceland. Her research interests include social movement rhetoric and ideas from a historical perspective, the relationship between political activism and ideas about power, identities, and liberation in a historical context, and the relationship between social movements and historical change. Pálmadóttir's current research project is about women's strikes as a political strategy and is funded by the Icelandic Research Fund. Dr. Pálmadóttir's research has been published in *Nora: Nordic Journal of Gender and Feminist Research*, and she is the co-editor of *Feminist Philosophy: Time, History and the Transformation of Thought*, Södertörn studies in Intellectual and Cultural History, Stockholm: Södertörn Academic Studies, 2023.

Evelina Johanson Wilén holds a Ph.D. in Gender Studies from Gothenburg University (Sweden) and is an assistant professor at Halmstad University (Sweden). Her research interests include feminist and anti-feminist movements, the political implications of vulnerability and marginalization, experiential knowledge in various political movements, the intersection of ethics and politics within contemporary feminist thought and activism, and feminist epistemology. Currently, she is involved in two research projects. The first project, funded by Riksbankens jubileumsfond, examines the integration of sex and gender perspectives as a quality measure by Swedish state-funded research councils and how this integration relates to different conceptualizations of the relationship between science and politics. The second project, funded by the Swedish research council, examines the incel movement and the epistemological tropes that this movement mobilizes. Dr. Johansson Wilén has published her research in journals such as *Feminist Theory*, *NORA*, *Social Inclusion*, *Journal of Resistance Studies*, and *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*.

Eva Schmitz is a retired senior scholar at Halmstad University (Sweden). Schmitz defended her doctoral thesis in sociology, *Systerskap som politisk handling: kvinnors organisering in Sverige 1968-1982* (Sisterhood as a political action: women's organizing in Sweden 1968-1982), at Lund University in 2007. She has written extensively on the feminist movement and the female worker's role in the rise of the labor movement in Sweden until the 1930s. In addition, she has studied women's strikes in Swedish history from the point of view of gender and class and the history of the struggle for abortion in Sweden and internationally.



# **Collective Identity, Solidarity, and Sisterhood in the ASAB Cleaning Women's Strike and the Women's Day Off in Iceland**

## **Abstract:**

In recent years women's- and feminist movements have increasingly employed the form and rhetoric of strikes in framing their protests. The rise of the women's strike movement has been seen as an indicator of an invigorated wave of feminist activism that focuses, to a greater extent, on structural economic injustices, and it has caught the interest of scholars from various fields. The aim of this article is to provide a historical aspect to the growing research on strikes as a multifaceted form of protest, particularly as it appears within the feminist movement. The article analyses articulations of collective identity, solidarity, and sisterhood in two different kinds of 'women's strikes' that took place in the Nordic region during the mid-1970s; the ASAB cleaners' strikes in Sweden during the winter of 1974-1975 and the Icelandic Women's Day Off that took place on October 24, 1975. This contrastive analysis includes exploring how the relationship between gender and class was conceptualized by leading participants, organizers, and bystanders. In addition, we employ these cases to study how solidarity and sisterhood across differences among women might have appeared in practice while at the same time reflecting internal tensions and varying interests. Moreover, the article reflects on the specific form of the strikes and the potential impact their respective form might have had on the political articulations that came out of them. By this, the article contributes to the historical and theoretical discussion on solidarity within women's activism, gender aspects of labor struggle, and expressions of political identity.

**Keywords:** solidarity; sisterhood; collective identity; women's strikes; political strikes; labor history; feminist history; Marxist feminism; gender & class

## **Introduction**

In recent years women's- and feminist movements have increasingly employed the form and rhetoric of strikes in framing their protests. The rise of the women's strike movement has been seen as an indicator of an invigorated wave of feminist activism

that focuses, to a greater extent, on structural economic injustices (Aruzza et al., 2019). A key issue in this contemporary movement concerns the possibility and power of broad and effective solidarity across differences based on class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and identity that traverse national borders (Emejulu, 2018). Furthermore, the focus on work and economic exploitation that accompanies the strike-form is reminiscent of the radicalism of the 1970s.

The aim of this article is to provide a historical aspect to the growing research field on strikes as a multifaceted form of protest, particularly as it appears within the feminist movement. A more specific aim is to investigate discourses and practices of solidarity in specific actions driven by demands and identities based on gender and class. Our focus is on two different kinds of ‘women’s strikes’ that took place in the Nordic region during the mid-1970s. With these historical cases, we explore articulations of collective identities as well as the emergence of different forms of solidarity.

The first case is the ASAB cleaners’ strikes in Sweden during the winter of 1974-1975 that sparked a wave of solidarity among radical women’s movements and working-class men. The second case is the Icelandic Women’s Day Off (hereafter WDO), which took place on October 24, 1975, and constituted a general one-day work stoppage, uniting a great majority of the women in the country in a collective action focusing on society’s undervaluing of women’s work.<sup>1</sup> While the ASAB strikes were a traditional industrial dispute, i.e., workplace strikes directed against a particular employer, with specific demands and lasting for a more extended period, the WDO was

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<sup>1</sup> The dominant narrative concerning the Icelandic women’s strike is that approximately 90 per cent of women in the country participated in or supported the actions. The 90% figure comes from the organizers themselves and although it is based on polls that they made during the days and weeks before the action, the total support is arguably an exaggeration and thus partly a myth.

– as the contemporary feminist strikes – less formal and lasting for only one day. Furthermore, the WDO is more in line with so-called political strikes, albeit directed against society in general and not solely against the government. The WDO received worldwide attention as it was covered in media all over the globe and has figured as an inspirational example from history of the possibility of vast solidarity among women in the struggle against gender-based oppression (James, 2018; Kubisa & Rakowska, 2018).

Of particular interest in this article is how the relationship between gender and class is negotiated in the two strikes and how other ‘differences’ may have surfaced in the political practice without necessarily being part of the primary framing or political discourse. As Alcalde-González et al. (2022) have noted, intersectionality is a theoretical concept and a political method associated with contemporary social movements. It is explicitly used by young university-educated participants (millennials) who want to emphasize their awareness about various power differentials. However, what could be called intersectional practices (with current vocabulary) can indeed be present in social movements without being named as such. Our approach in focusing on how the gendered ‘we-ness’ was articulated and negotiated in the strikes is inspired by Briskins’ ‘gendering labour militancies’, a concept designed to analyze the way in which gender as a political category is mobilized but also opposed and transformed in workplace strikes. In this respect, the traditional and non-traditional strikes and the ‘cultures of solidarity’ (Fantasia, 1988) and the identities they produce are of particular interest. Hence, we explore articulations of collective identity and solidarity in the two historical actions/strikes. Our research questions are, firstly, how was the relationship between gender and class conceptualized by leading participants and organizers, bystanders, sympathizers, and critics? Secondly, to what extent were women’s differences taken into account in the two strikes on a discursive (theoretical) level and

in concrete political practices? Finally, we also reflect on what impact the specific form of the strikes might have had on the political articulations that came out of them in terms of shared identities and political solidarity.

### **Previous research**

Empirical research concerning women on strike and strikes in female-dominated sectors constitutes a well-developed field of research internationally (Jackson, 2005; Beckwith, 1998; Mackey, 1986; Maggard, 1990). While some research maintains that women are less eager to strike than men (for a discussion, see Fransson, 2009), other researchers describe women workers as more active in strike actions than within unions (Schmitz, 1982; 1999). Furthermore, much research has emphasized the somewhat uneasy relationship between women strikers and male-dominated labor unions. For example, unions have historically pictured women as difficult to organize (Marx Ferree and Roth, 1998) and have often not supported women's strikes (Smith, 1994; Schmitz, 2007; Hirdman, 2002). Moreover, Stevenson has pointed to how the class-based identity of women strikers tends to be negotiated as they encounter patriarchal structures in their workplace and their unions (Stevenson, 2016). Research has also shown how women often bring issues of women's traditional reproductive role into economic strikes, highlighting the specific position of female workers (Smith, 1994) and the conventional labor movements' exclusion of these gender-specific issues (Feldberg, 1987; Milkman, 1985; Hartman, 1976). As will become evident, the strikes that are in focus in this article actualize gender and reproductive work in similarity with other historical and contemporary examples of women's strikes.

Another aspect that relates to the subject of this article concerns what has been described as the 'long and troubled history' of women's movements and labor

movements (Marx Ferree and Roth, 1998; Meyer and Whittier, 1994). In the words of Arruzza (2013), ‘the history of the relationship between the women’s movement and the workers’ movement has been littered with successful and failed alliances, open hostility, affection and disaffection’ (p. 19). However, the period in focus in this article, the 1970s, marked an increased interaction between these movements. For instance, Stevenson (2016) has exemplified how the increased militancy of working-class women was highly significant for the U.K. Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). For the socialist feminists in the WLM, the women workers’ industrial conflicts exemplified a ‘parallel development that had a “formative” influence on the WLM ideology, primarily through underlining the importance of “cross-class alliances” between women.’ (Stevenson, 2016:741). As for the Nordic context, Dahlerup (1998) describes how the Danish Redstockings were like the rest of the new left, against ‘the system’ that included, among other social institutions, the trade unions, which they pejoratively called ‘the trade petrification’ (d. fagforsteningen). Still, the Danish Redstockings put much emphasis on class and supported working-class women in their struggle, for example, with solidarity actions during ‘women’s strikes’, i.e., workplace strikes in female-dominated sectors (Dahlerup, 1998). Similarly, what became the most visible and known women’s liberation group in Sweden, Group 8 (Grupp 8), established in the late 1960s, focused on women’s exploitation as workers. Group 8 was similar to the Danish Redstockings, a radical socialist group that highlighted and supported the struggle of working-class women while being critical of the male dominance in the trade unions (Schmitz, 2007; Elgán, 2015; Isaksson, 2007). As Elgán (2015) explains, Group 8 identified their struggle as a part of the overall working-class struggle since their aim was a socialist revolution – which they considered a precondition for women’s liberation (p. 210).

The formation of political subjectivity and alliances in workplace strikes have been well covered internationally. However, Linderoth (2020) points out that the subject has not received much attention in the Nordic context, except for Schmitz's work (2007). Linderoth's study on the 2003 wage strike by the Swedish Municipal Workers Union (Kommunal) also makes an essential contribution to the field, criticizing the commonly held view that the strike was a failure, by addressing the experiences of the strikers themselves rather than the concrete outcomes in terms of better working conditions or higher salary. Like Linderoth, we are interested in the collective identity and cultures of solidarity articulated in the strikes rather than in determining whether the strikes in focus were successful in their concrete demands. Our article also analyzes the very form of the strikes and whether that might play a role in the articulations of shared identity and political solidarity.

Empirical research on contemporary one-day women's strikes is a growing research field. Studies include overviews of specific one-day strike actions in one country, including a list of demands and analysis of the scope of participation and immediate social and political context (Mondragon et al., 2021; Król and Pustulka, 2018; Campillo, 2019; García et al., 2018). In terms of a more detailed analysis of the ideological aspects, Kubisa & Rakowska (2019) have analyzed the significance of the uses of the form and rhetoric of industrial disputes, i.e., strikes, in the protest of social movements in Poland since 2016. They argue that even though the Polish women's strike and the protest of parents of people with disabilities were not strikes *de jure*, the form allowed them to highlight and reject the 'division between production (wage labour) and reproduction (non-wage labour), which gave a deeper meaning to the "refusal of work"' (p. 15).

Finally, scholarly work on historical cases of politically motivated one-day

women's strikes is scant. The literature mainly consists of memoirs written by organizers, descriptive overviews of the main demands, immediate historical context, and the extent of participation and outcome (Einarsdóttir & Steinhórsdóttir, 1977; Steinþórsdóttir, 1980; de Bruijn, Henkes and Janssen, 1982; Einarsdóttir, 1986; Gallin, 1991; Hákonardóttir, 2005). Our article partly takes its point of departure in overviews of the Icelandic women's strike but contextualizes it with more extensive empirical material and subjects it to a theoretical analysis usually missing in previous accounts of this action.

### **Material and methodological approach**

In this article, we compare and contrast the ASAB strike and the WDO; both constitute actions that were defined as 'women's strikes.' However, while one was named as such because it was a strike in a female-dominated (and female-coded) occupation organized by female workers, the other was an initiative with an aim to mobilize women as *women* in a joint strike, no matter occupation or class. Although this difference brings with it some methodological challenges, as the strikes are not comparable in a strict sense, it is precisely this difference that is the focus of our contrasting analysis. We argue that this contrast makes visible some interesting tensions within the history of women's feminist activism and labor struggle. Furthermore, these different 'women's strikes' took place roughly around the same time, during which the so-called new women's movement had effectively mobilized the public debate on women's situation in society in the Nordic region. In the Nordic countries, the feminist movement was predominantly Marxist-inspired until the 1980s (Dahlerup, 1998; Halsaa, 2002; Isaksson, 2005; Elgán, 2001; Schmitz, 2007; Pálmadóttir and Sjöstedt, 2022). The so-called 'new women's movement' that gained momentum in the Nordic region around the 1970s focused extensively on the question of work, class, and women's material conditions under

capitalism. Around this time, feminist organizations with a radical outlook and close connections with the new left were established in many parts of the Nordic region. Classic liberal demands based on women's access to public life, equal opportunities, and the expansion of rights were now increasingly challenged by the new women's movements with more radical rhetoric targeting the capitalist mode of production and discourses of restructuring society in terms of substantial equality. In different ways, the ASAB cleaners' strike and the WDO exemplified and were partly signified by the idea that women's struggle and class struggle is intimately linked.

Both events were, to a varying degree, embedded in discourses about - and practices of - collective identity and articulations of solidarity across and between gender, class, and other differences in ways that revealed both conflictual and productive tensions. The feminist focus on work was accompanied by interaction and sometimes cooperation between (often middle-class) women's liberationists and working-class women (many of them foreign citizens), as well as between rural and urban women. Although the issue of class was central and influenced discourses and practices of solidarity, there was a consciousness about the differences among women and how these conditioned women's experiences and opportunities. Both cases of 'women's strikes' received extensive public attention, and they actualized notions of women's solidarity across differences. Nevertheless, the strikes differed regarding the overall outlook, including form, time frame, structure, and context. Hence, they expose the multiplicity of arenas in which political identities, solidarity, and sisterhood appeared on a discursive level and in praxis.

The material in our first case, the study on the ASAB strikes, consists of articles from newspapers, interviews with strikers in mass media, and magazines of the new women's movement during the strike. Furthermore, we use interviews that one of the

authors of this article, Eva Schmitz, conducted with several leaders in the strike almost 30 years after the strike (2001–2002). The interviews focused on the background of the strike, how they organized the struggle, and what impact they felt it had. Of particular interest during the interviews was how their political consciousness changed during the conflict, whom they collaborated with, how they conceived the support they got, and their relation to the women's movement.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, interviews could be described as retrospective conversations where the respondents' memory was at the center, inspired by the method of oral history (Moore, 2011; Portelli, 1979). By interviewing central actors in the strike and letting them talk about their experiences, the specific 'culture of solidarity' that the strike fostered gets clearer contours compared to only consulting textual material that might be more reliable when it comes to the 'hard facts' of the strikes (Fantasia, 1988; Linderöth, 2020). In other words, the interviewees can retell the course of events in a way that might be partially mistaken in facts – due to the ravages of time – but that might do a better job of capturing the spirit of the strike (although there might be a tendency to romanticize struggles from the past and forget the negative aspects that the struggles might have contained).

Although twenty years have passed since the interviews were conducted as part of another research project with a slightly different focus than the current study, their content corresponds well with our research questions. However, we read the interviews anew with a slightly different lens, informed by the current theoretical and political context and the aims of this contrastive study. Nevertheless, some reservations should be made, and the material might have been different if the interviews had been conducted for this study. Regarding the ASAB strike, this oral material is of great

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<sup>2</sup> Several of the cleaners had preserved great amounts of material from the strike in the form of press clippings, flyers, and support telegrams that helped them to recall events and their experiences of them.

importance since written material by the strikers themselves is limited. However, exceptions are books and journals, including interviews with the cleaners conducted during the strikes and a few years after (Bergom-Larsson, 1975; Johansson & Grahm, 1975; Järhult, 1982).

The second case, the study on the Icelandic action, is based on a reading of textual material produced by members of the women's movements that organized the WDO and coverage of the actions in the media. The material is varied and consists of correspondences, flyers, meeting protocols, publications, and speeches kept at the Women's History Archives in Iceland ([www.kvennasogusafn.is](http://www.kvennasogusafn.is)). Media representation of public debates about the issues in question is also, to a great extent, accessible in the Icelandic online media archive ([www.timarit.is](http://www.timarit.is)). In addition to that, similarly, as with the ASAB strike, we make certain use of memoirs from the struggle, written by members of the Redstocking movement decades after the strike. Since the WDO was an ideologically driven activist-organized event aimed, among other things, to raise the general consciousness in society about women's situation and gender (in)equality, more textual material with a theoretical and argumentative outlook was produced in relation to it than is the case for the ASAB strike.

The empirical material on the studies was collected in two independent projects and produced in different periods and contexts. Nevertheless, we argue that there are certain similarities in the methodological approaches because both give us an insight into how various participants understood the strikes and how solidarities and collective identities were articulated and negotiated throughout the strikes.

### **Theoretical framework**

In this study, we are interested in solidarity and collective identity as articulated and

negotiated in the two strikes. In line with Melucci's work, we argue that 'the empirical unity of a social movement should be considered as a result rather than a starting point' (Melucci, 1995, p. 43) and that the task of scholars studying social movements is - as Fominaya (2010) puts it - partly 'to understand how a movement succeeds or fails in becoming a collective actor' (p. 55). We understand collective identity as something that is created in the relation between individuals who partake in a common struggle rather than something that necessarily precedes this struggle. As Snow (2001) phrases it, it 'can be argued that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of "we-ness".' (p. 175). As we will demonstrate in our analysis of the WDO, a politically motivated and discursively created 'we' can undoubtedly constitute a premise on which to organize action – while the level and content of the solidarity and the collective identities that come out of the process may vary significantly in strength, thickness, and temporality.

In line with Fantasia (1988) and Darcy and Lauzon (1983), we consider strikes as political forms where the development of class consciousness and collective identity is of particular importance – and in the case of the one-day women's strikes, a gendered political consciousness. While collective identity is constructed through practical political work, it is also dependent on intellectual work and the discursive framing carried out by the movement (Roseneil, 1995, p. 32). However, this emphasis on collective identity as something that is constructed practically and theoretically does not imply that we - as do postmarxist thinkers such as Mouffe - consider political collectives as entirely discursively constructed (Mouffe 2005, see Johansson Wilén, 2019). Instead, we argue that a class or a political collective can exist regardless of whether they articulate themselves as such. In other words, we argue that material conditions situate different groups of people differently, and collective identities and

movements can - to a lesser or greater degree - reflect these material conditions. As Linderroth puts it, the fact that human action is filtered through culture does not mean that it is entirely reducible to it (Linderroth 2020, p. 75). Hence, while this article looks at collective identity as something emerging in the strikes, this does not downplay the importance of material conditions in the formation of collective identity.

Allen (1999) has argued that second-wave feminism was an ‘appeal to the common interests of women, a call for a response to a shared experience (oppression) that binds women together as sisters, in other words, an appeal to solidarity (at least in one sense of the term)’ (1999, p. 99). In other words, solidarity within the feminist movement was often built upon the idea of a we-ness in terms of sisterhood or ‘gendered’ solidarity. Du Plessis and Snitow have - in a similar vein - insisted that the idea of sisterhood was the first explanatory model for “pure” solidarity between women (1998:8). By emphasizing similarity in women’s social and economic position in society and the family, sisterhood became a symbol in the struggle against male dominance. Hence, it can be argued that the concept of sisterhood was introduced as a strategy to counteract antagonism and competition among women (Schmitz, 2007) rather than being a rejection of differences among various groups of women. However, since the 1980s, the concept of sisterhood as a collective identity has been more and more questioned, which also affected the role of sisterly solidarity in the feminist movement: ‘[T]he feminist critique of identity politics seemed to necessitate a corresponding critique of solidarity’ (Allen 1999, p. 99). For example, Mohanty advocates the concept of solidarity instead of sisterhood, arguing that ‘rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together’ (Mohanty 2003, p. 7). Building on Dean’s (1996) notion of ‘reflective solidarity,’ Mohanty describes

solidarity as a political achievement resulting from an active struggle rather than a pre-given common identity. We sympathize with Mohanty's emphasis on solidarity as a process, but we believe that sisterhood can be understood in a similar way, as reflective and processual. Needless to say, there have always been political interpretative struggles on how sisterhood should be defined and how sisterhood relates to other political 'we's' (Lykke, 2018; Jónasdóttir, 1991). However, there is a tendency in feminist storytelling to downplay this historical diversity within feminist theory and feminist politics (Hemmings, 2011).

### **The ASAB cleaners' strikes in Sweden**

The cleaners at the steel plant in the small city of Borlänge started a strike on November 19, 1974, against the advice of their own union, *The Swedish Building Maintenance Workers Union* (Fastighetsanställdas Förbund). This occurred after a long period of dissatisfaction among the cleaners with how they were treated by their employer ASAB (Allmänna Svenska städnings A.B.), owned jointly by the Wallenberg group and the Danish cleaning company ISS. The company had 8000 employees, of which 7000 were part-time workers, 80% were women, and 30% were not Swedish citizens. The catalyzing factor for the dispute was the introduction of a new salary system that, in practice, resulted in more work for less salary (Göransson, 1979, p. 183). In a matter of a few weeks, the struggle of the cleaners in Borlänge had resulted in a wave of wildcat strikes among ASAB cleaners in different parts of Sweden.

The strikes were illegal since they were not called on by a recognized negotiating partner, i.e., the union. Furthermore, new laws on employment security (Lag om anställningsskydd 1974:12) stated employers' right to fire wildcat strike leaders, and the court proceedings concerning the fired ASAB cleaners were, in fact, the first trial of

the new laws (Järhult, 1982). Thus, the illegality of the strike made the cleaner's situation particularly precarious – they were severely risking their employment and livelihood. These risks were realized in the town of Skövde in South Western Sweden, where ASAB fired striking cleaners. Finally, this wave of wildcat strikes among cleaners around the country ended with a verdict in the labor court in May 1975, where fired hotel cleaners from Skövde were trialed for illegal striking and strike agitation.

The labor court ruling was mixed: Two former unionists who were charged with illegal strike agitation were not judged to be strike leaders, and ASAB was therefore not allowed to fire them on those grounds, whereas the company had the right to fire other ten cleaners in the group as it was formally a wildcat strike. However, the next day, ASAB declared on the T.V. news that all dismissed cleaners were offered re-employment. The opinion in support of the cleaners' rights had become so large throughout Sweden that ASAB felt compelled to rehire them all. Concerning the outcome of the case, one of the Skövde cleaners said that "We did not win anything in the Labor Court, but on the other hand, we won something very substantial, an awareness and a solidarity that is fantastic." (Dagens Nyheter 16.03.76; Schmitz, 2007, p. 318)

The ASAB cleaners' strikes were the first 'women's strikes' in Sweden since the 1930s and thus received extensive public attention as such, not the least from the radical women's movements in Sweden (See, for example, Vi människor, 1975; Johansson & Graham 1975; Bergom-Larson 1975; Andersson R. & Bergom-Larsson M, 1975; Kvinnobulletinen, 1974, p.13). Furthermore, an interesting fact from the point of this article, is that the Swedish cleaners' strikes and the labor court proceedings were covered in Icelandic left-wing media by the journalist, Redstocking movement member and WDO organizer, Vilborg Harðardóttir. Harðardóttir emphasized the significance of

the cleaners' struggle as a case that combined the aspects of gender and class (*Þjóðviljinn*, 27.04.75; 01.06.75). As the examples above indicate, the public interest in the strikes is partly explained by the fact that they took place during which the new women's movement was at its height. Women's situation, work, and struggle were on the public agenda. The plight of the precarious working-class women situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy became a strong symbol of the low value of traditional women's work.

The striking cleaners had no previous experience of union struggle, but they learned from the male miners who had been on a huge strike five years earlier and now (for the most part) expressed their support (Schmitz, 2007, p. 306). On numerous occasions, the cleaners have expressed the obstacles they faced in the initial stages of their struggle, and among the difficulties they faced in their organizing had to do with the nature of the work. For instance, the cleaning was mostly performed in isolation, and they rarely met each other. Moreover, one of the striking cleaners expressed that the low social value and respect for their work resulted in a lack of profession-based identity and pride (Järhult, 1982). Last but not least, the cleaners experienced a lack of interest in their struggle by their union and even, at times, outspoken hostility from the union representatives or ombudsmen (Schmitz, 2007, p. 302; Järhult 1982, p. 56). Due to the lack of support from the union, the cleaners took matters into their own hands; they collected signatures and started their own local union club that led the struggle – despite not being a formally recognized negotiating partner. However, notwithstanding the lack of support from the official union, the union membership among the cleaners rose from 10% before the struggle started to 50% by the time the strike broke out (Schmitz, 2007, p. 325).

## **The Icelandic Women's Day Off**

The idea of performing a one-day women's strike to manifest the importance of their work contribution and thereby demonstrate against society's downgrading of women as second-class citizens came from the women's liberation group the Redstocking movement (*Rauðsokkahreyfingin*) established in Reykjavik in 1970. Five years later, the idea was realized in what became one of the most extensive manifestations in Iceland's history until the present day, i.e., the WDO, which took place on the day of the United Nations on October 24, 1975.

In brief, the immediate prelude to the WDO is that the Redstockings organized, together with several women's labor unions (representing unskilled women workers), a conference on women's low wages in January 1975.<sup>3</sup> This conference adopted a resolution in favor of a general women's strike for one day. Other demands included three months of paid leave in connection to childbirth, an extension of public daycare, and that housework should be valued as work experience. Finally, the conference resolution expressed a critique concerning the plans for a government-appointed committee on the occasion of the International Women's Year (IWY), which, at the time, did not include any representatives from the worker's movement (*Alþýðublaðið* 29.01.75). Half a year later, in June 1975, the IWY committee arranged a prominent women's conference in Reykjavik, gathering around 50 organizations and associations ranging from charity groups, women's labor unions, housewife associations, women's chapters of the political parties, and radical women's groups such as the Redstockings. The Redstockings used the opportunity proved by the IWY women's conference to

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<sup>3</sup> In Iceland, there was a tradition of specific women's labor unions, dating back to the beginning of 20th century when the traditional unions (representing male workers) were skeptical of taking women on board. Furthermore, members of the Icelandic Women's Rights Association were pivotal in encouraging working women to organize and establish labor unions (Magnúsdóttir, 1991).

agitate for the strike idea. A leading thought behind a joint women's strike was to raise women's consciousness about how the value of their work or 'contribution' was downgraded because of their sex - no matter where they worked, where they stood politically, or what class they belonged.

Just before the conference, a small group of women of various ages and backgrounds from different organizations across the political spectrum who had been convinced about the idea had been strategically chosen to put forward a motion about a one-day women's strike. The motion gained the majority of votes in favor after critical discussions that, however, were settled when one of the presenters suggested that it be framed as a somewhat milder sounding 'day off' instead of the more militant 'strike' (Einarsdóttir, 1986). Consequently, at this women's conference in June - meant to be the height of activities in Iceland during IWY - a decision was taken by representatives of this heterogeneous collection of women's organizations and clubs to unite behind the idea of a one-day women's work stoppage to mark the Women's Year with a spectacular action (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980, p. 49).

By this, the work-stoppage idea suddenly had formal support from a wide variety of women's associations that differed in terms of interests, values, and aims. Subsequently, a cross-political executive committee to be at the forefront of the organizing was formed. The main agitators for the action considered it essential that the organizing team would reflect a broad political spectrum to appeal to as many women as possible. The organizers then worked extensively for approximately six weeks to promote the actions and articulate the reasons behind the work stoppage in various channels. The turnout was huge, and the day's highlight was the manifestation meeting in downtown Reykjavik with a carefully selected program with speeches, theatrical performances, and songs (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980; Einarsdóttir, 1986). Groups of women

from outside the Reykjavik area came with buses to participate in the manifestation meeting, but meetings and gatherings were also held in towns around the country (KSS 1, A3).

The WDO had two primary aims: First, to demand recognition for women's essential contribution to society and highlight the unfairness in how women's work, in general, was rewarded in terms of low wages and lack of respect. Secondly, the aim was to express the power of solidarity among women in Iceland and the world's women (especially those in less well-off countries) during the U.N. Women's Year. Of course, the speaker's ideological position somewhat affected what aims they emphasized. Notably, the flyers that the executive committee circulated to promote the actions only focused on gender-political issues within Icelandic society. For instance, the critical issues mentioned by the organizing team were the gender pay gap in Iceland; the lack of respect for housewives, and the undervaluing of women's work inside the homes; that married female farmers were only considered 'farmers wives' with the corresponding economic undervaluing of their work; the negative discourse on women's demand for public daycare that pictured women as bad mothers and lazy (KSS 1, A3).

### **On solidarity, collective identity, and the form of the strikes**

In this part of the paper, we will examine the ties of solidarity and the collective identities formed during the strikes. We will also discuss the potential impact the very form of the two strikes might have had in these formations.

An essential aspect of the ASAB strikes concerns the fact that they were illegal wildcat strikes and somewhat spontaneously provoked. During the initial negotiations with ASAB, the cleaners experienced that the union was not on their side. On the contrary, the union representatives initially responded to the cleaners' complaints that

if they were so dissatisfied with the salaries, they should just find another job. The striking cleaners repeatedly referred to this incident in interviews in various contexts (Schmitz, 2007, p. 302; Järhult, 1982, p. 56). This manifest hostility expressed by the union representatives appears to have been felt by the cleaners as disrespectfully discouraging while simultaneously motivating the anger necessary for the struggle. The cleaners also emphasized how the union representatives lacked all enthusiasm to struggle against the employers in the negotiations and urged the cleaners to return to work – even though their demands had not been met. While the striking cleaners in Borlänge were disregarded by their own union, support and solidarity came from other directions. For instance, the male workers at the steel plant showed the striking cleaners immediate support and economic solidarity. According to the striking women, the steelworkers' moral support was vital as they urged the women not to give up (Schmitz, 2007, p. 303). In an interview published in *Kvinnobulletinen*, the mouthpiece of Group 8, two of the cleaners emphasized how vital the media attention was for their struggle:

This understandably noticed dispute was discussed in local media, as in the national press, including radio and T.V. Soon, one understood that it was not only dissatisfaction among us here in Borlänge – the strike was spreading. The result was not only a victory for the Borlänge cleaners; it also opened up for a questioning of the union and discussions about typical women's low-paid work and the cleaning job as a profession. (*Kvinnobulletinen*, 1975).

In addition, when the first 'women's strike' in decades broke out, the interest of feminists was awakened as local women's groups and nationwide radical women's organizations started organizing solidarity actions. For example, various women's groups immediately started fundraising, which proved essential since many strikers were in very precarious economic situations (Schmitz, 2007, p. 303).

The striking women's ties to the predominantly male workers' movement were strong throughout the strike, with male workers actively supporting and giving advice. However, that solidarity was, to some extent, conditioned, as we will discuss further on. In contrast, the relationship with the feminist groups grew at a slower pace. For instance, in the beginning, the ASAB cleaners saw their strike, first and foremost, as a spontaneous struggle against low wages and unreasonable working conditions, and they were inspired by cleaners' strikes in Norway and Britain (Schmitz, 2007, p. 326). Gradually, accompanying their experiences in the struggle against both their employer, ASAB, and their union, their class consciousness and professional pride were strengthened.

Initially, the cleaners did not view their strike as part of a broader women's struggle, and most of them had no previous connection with the women's movement. But, ever since the first strike broke out in Borlänge, the cleaners got support from the newly started women's liberation group in the town (and from Group 8). According to one of the cleaners, this was their first contact with women's liberationists, even though they had heard and read about them in the media. In some ways, the feminists applied an ideological framework to the cleaners' struggle, insisting on analyzing it in terms of a woman's struggle – initially sensed as foreign to many of these working-class women. Furthermore, despite the support, many of the striking women were skeptical of the feminists whom they sensed belonged to another class, another world. As a cleaner from Malmberget said: "I remember how we said about Group 8, that they were such *nice* girls (she laughs) – who hadn't ever held a scrub rag" (Schmitz, 2007, p. 347).

Yet, the female cleaners appreciated the support and solidarity from the feminists. Some of the cleaners have expressed how they gradually realized the significance of the gendered nature of their struggle, not least as an effect of the support

from radical women's groups and by associating with women from Group 8 and similar groups (Schmitz, 2007, p. 347). Furthermore, during the strikes, they were continually reminded about the relevance of their gender - not least because of the lack of support from their own union representatives, who were all men. Hence, during the strike, the cleaners became more aware of their subordinate position as women and the low value of their workforce as female workers doing specifically female-coded work. For example, in one of their demonstrations against ASAB, the striking cleaners stood outside the company's offices in Kiruna in Northern Sweden and sang their own version of the International, 'Up women, who mop the floors and clean - we who have been chained in slavery. Now, we dare to strike for better wages. Away with the women's wages, let's throw them to the gravel.' (Schmitz, 2007, p. 332).

Finally, with the strike, the cleaners also challenged the expected traditional role of women in the current society and developed a kind of feminist consciousness, although they would not define themselves as such. As one of the striking cleaners expressed in an interview in Group 8's magazine, *Kvinnobulletinen*:

Cleaning, that's what women do... And we have been silent... Women should speak more in order to receive rights... Work as work, they say... No, we women have to gang up – we are raised to be patient – but now, we must band up and demand our rights! (Kvinnobulletinen, 1975:1, p. 11).

In the ASAB strike, the feminist support contributed to some extent to friction in the relationship between the striking women and the male steelworkers. The way in which the feminists framed the struggle as a 'women's struggle' annoyed representatives from the Metal union who had been backing the strike. According to one of the Borlänge cleaners, one of the Metal union representatives warned them against Group 8, that 'they were revolutionary manhaters' (Schmitz, 2007, p. 328). The Metal Union even

threatened to withdraw the collection for the cleaners if they did not break all connections with the feminists. The cleaners answered that they would not let themselves be controlled by the Metal Union. In that case, they would rather lose their financial support (ibid).

Moreover, the cleaners did not only face difficulties in terms of loyalty conflicts based on class or gender. The solidarity needed for the struggle also proved challenging to create among workers who seldomly interacted with each other but mostly worked alone (Järhult, 1982, p. 58). However, the strike leaders and the cleaners' own union club worked extensively to break the cleaners' isolation and cultivated solidarity through frequent meetings where they strengthened the spirit needed for the struggle. In addition, it was a conscious effort among the women's union club to create unity among the cleaners who were divided in terms of ethnicity. The group consisted of Swedish, Finnish, and Greek women, many of whom did not speak Swedish - but the Swedish-speaking union club members made sure to recruit translators for every meeting so that everyone understood what was going on (Schmitz, 2007, p. 329).

In contrast with the ASAB strike, where a certain *women's* solidarity or a specific and contextual sisterhood grew somewhat spontaneously during the struggle, women's solidarity was among the primary aims of the WDO actions - a symbol of unity that the organizers consciously agitated for against the degradation of women's work in general.

Among the objectives of the WDO was to encourage women to join in a common action to *feel* the strength of solidarity and simultaneously *demonstrate* the power of this solidarity to the world. The organizers, with the executive committee at the forefront, conducted polls concerning possible participation before the actions,

which indicated support by 80 to 100 percent of women in the country (depending on the context or workplace). The organizing team then used these numbers in press releases and other media outlets, claiming that there already was almost total support for the actions. Thus, the organizers can be said to have discursively created the idea of complete solidarity to influence and agitate for solidarity in practice.

Many of the organizers have described the feelings of solidarity during the action day. For instance, Gerður Steinþórsdóttir writes that ‘the atmosphere was fantastic, there we stood, thirty thousand, and felt the power of solidarity’ (Steinþórsdóttir 1980, p. 47). However, the narratives of the organizers are limited, as they provide only a partial description, and they were arguably more invested in the action than other participants. Yet, if participation in the action is used as a measure – a standard description is that 90% of women in Iceland supported the action – then the WDO indeed can be seen as a great expression of women’s solidarity. Nevertheless, a question remains about what demands or ideals this solidarity centered on and what kind of collective identities, if any, it gave rise to.

In practice, the heterogeneous collection of organizers of the WDO focused on different groups of women. As a result, sometimes conflicting discourses appeared as the organizers used different channels and framed the actions differently according to their political outlook. These variations of the framing of the actions result in a plurality of expressions of solidarity. For instance, Redstocking member, organizer, and journalist Vilborg Harðardóttir wrote in the leftist daily paper *Þjóðviljinn* (e. The Will of the Nation), on the day of the actions: ‘Against economic subordination, women should struggle side by side with the rest of the working class. [...] Full victory in the struggle of the working class will never be achieved without the active participation of women, half of all working people.’ (*Þjóðviljinn*, 24.10.75, p. 4). Here, Harðardóttir

implies that all women - as they are workers – share the interest with the working class against the exploitation of the capitalist system – resonating somewhat with Du Plessi's and Snitow's notion of pure solidarity. While Bessí Jóhannsdóttir, a representative for the right-wing Independence Party in the WDO executive committee, emphasized that according to her party's view, the struggle for gender equality should be fought within the frames of society as it is – arguing further that the root of gender inequality lies in prejudices among both men and women (*Morgunblaðið*, 23.10.75). Other examples of tension in how the actions were framed can be found in the speeches at the manifestation meeting. While the worker and women's union representative Aðalheiður Bjarnfreðsdóttir expressed her hope that the day would bring attention to the plight of working-class women in Iceland (KSS 1, A3), Guðrún Erlendsdóttir, chair of the IWY committee and moderator at the manifestation, emphasized what with this action, women in Iceland were showing solidarity with women in 'developing countries,' which was, she claimed, the primary aim of the IWY (KSS 1, A3). Finally, Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir, a member of the Redstocking movement, expressed a brief statement emphasizing the organization's view on solidarity and differences:

The Women's Year has given the question about woman's situation in society relevance. Whatever that situation might be, we have proved that the solidarity is total. Nevertheless, we, in the Redstocking movement, want to encourage you, women, each and everyone, to consider your specific situation. We do not constitute one class; we are divided into various interest groups within society. (KSS 1, A3).

All through the process, Redstocking members oscillated between emphasizing class differences between women on the one hand and, on the other hand, the idea that women as a group constitute a low-wage group underlining the importance of coming together across classes and realizing this commonality (*Þjóðviljinn* 25.6.75).

Redstockings members have also noted on numerous occasions that their initial allegiance making with the women's unions at the low-wage conference was crucial for plowing the ground and raising consciousness necessary for the turnout in the WDO (Árnadóttir 2011; *Morgunblaðið*, 27.8.02). Finally, the union representative Aðalheiður Bjarnfreðsdóttir, who was one of the main speakers at the manifestation meeting, titled 'verkakona' (e. unskilled female worker), was described by many as the star of the day. This previously unknown 54-year-old unskilled worker spoke to the crowd freely without a manuscript, as described by another organizer, '[Aðalheiður's] deep and powerful voice reached deep into our veins when she addressed us as "dear sisters in struggle"' (Einarsdóttir, 1985). Another indicator of Bjarnfreðsdóttir's impact during WDO is that she was elected Person of the Year (1975) by the non-aligned daily paper *Dagblaðið*. On that occasion, she proclaimed that 'despite everything, the Icelandic working-class woman – uneducated and poor – has value, and this is what I think our protest managed to manifest' (*Dagblaðið*, 2.1.76).

Although the WDO was a somewhat ideologically driven action with a pre-given collective identity as its premise and goal, the organizing team had to work hard to downplay differences and navigate between ideological conflicts. The associations and groups that united behind the work stoppage all constituted some kind of women's organization or society. Gender was a primary category around which they were built. However, that is not the same as saying that these groups were all based on a feminist ideology (Einarsdóttir, 2002; *Þjóðviljinn*, 25.6.75). The main agitators for the women's strike idea, i.e., the Redstockings, were certainly feminists, and they managed to convince a group of representatives from various women's societies to organize a one-time joint action, alas, with a relatively vague or open framing. While priding themselves in accomplishing working together despite differences in making the WDO

a 'world news' (*Vísir*, 11.10.75), it nevertheless was clear to the organizing team that the cooperation would not continue after this one-time event (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980). However, what regards a general feminist consciousness-raising accompanying the WDO, the Icelandic Women's Rights Association, and the Redstockings noted an increase in interest in their work, and the membership in both organizations rose significantly (Erlendsdóttir 1993, p. 365; Árnadóttir, 2011).

Similarly, as in Sweden, the cross-class solidarity among women provoked parts of the (male) working-class leadership in Iceland. The primarily middle-class Redstockings actively sought to make allegiance with women workers from the lower strata, and that was a concrete way for them to live up to their ideological conviction that the women's struggle was essentially a class struggle, a line that they formally adopted in 1974 (*Þjóðviljinn*, 13.06.74). The low-wage conference, held in January 1975, where the first decision to agitate for a general women's strike was taken, was part of their solidarity work with working-class women. Directly after that conference, criticism of the plans for a general women's strike came from the radical left in Iceland. In *The Class Struggle*, the mouthpiece of the new leftist group, the Communist movement, the Marxist Leninists. The speakers at the conference were said to have shown little signs of class solidarity since most were occupied with questions concerning women's rights. Furthermore, the idea of solidarity among women across classes entailed in the concept of a women's strike was criticized since it would position working-class women against working-class men and would, in the end, benefit none other than the employers because women's subordination is not first and foremost caused by the existence of man (sic.), similarly as men do not constitute any particular class by themselves [...] all society is divided into classes, and both sexes are a part of all classes.' (*Stéttabaráttan*, issue 2. 14.2.1975). Similarly, Redstocking member

Elísabet Gunnarsdóttir recounts how the leaders of the large unions (representing mostly male workers) were initially very critical of the Redstockings' meddling with the business of working-class women (Gunnarsdóttir in Árnadóttir, 2011, p. 275). Nevertheless, as it turned out, the largest unions and many radical leftist groups supported the actions on the day of the action (KSS 1, A3; Steinþórsdóttir 1980).

While both the ASAB strikes and the WDO, however, to various degrees, were characterized by both class solidarity and solidarity between women, the forms of the strikes were quite different. The ASAB strikes were, as we have mentioned, wildcat strikes organized by the cleaners themselves against the discouragement of their union. By striking, the cleaners became more aware of the stake of their strike as it threatened to close down the production in the mines. The solidarity among ASAB cleaners across the country was enormous. They stood up in solidarity for the fired cleaners against their company and against the whole Employers Association, SAF, who wanted to end the wave of wildcat strikes and issued directives to local employers to stop them from raising wages in the event of a wild strike. The striking cleaners' political consciousness as working-class *women* developed throughout the strike: they saw that their strike would hopefully start a class struggle with other low-paid women. This is in accordance with Darcy's and Lauzon's (1983) argument that strikes are not only a powerful weapon in the fight for worker's rights – striking can also be a liberating experience in itself by giving participants an idea of their collective strength, a clearer understanding of the reasons for their subordination, and a broader understanding of the social, economic, and political conditions in the society in which they live.

Similarly, Fantasia (1988) argues that class consciousness can develop during participation in a strike, which can be sensed from the cleaners' narratives of their strike experiences. The fact that gender enters the scene in the ASAB strike partly concerns

the fact that Grupp 8 (and other local feminist groups) showed their solidarity. Nevertheless, the importance of gender was also felt and articulated by the striking cleaners as they experienced that their demands were taken less seriously - because they were women. Hence, in the ASAB strike, gender and class were tied together naturally and organically. In short, this was not mainly because of a certain theoretical idea about how class and gender are connected that preceded the strike, but rather through the lived experience of struggles and solidarities that rose while striking.

While the ASAB strike was a spontaneous struggle from below, the WDO was a more ideologically driven, activist-organized event that had, among other things, cross-class, cross-political solidarity, and sisterhood, both as starting points and aims. For instance, in the initial stages of the organization, a representative for a union representing unskilled female workers emphasized the importance of including women from outside the capital area and argued that ‘all differences should be put aside for this day,’ women, she continued, ‘should meet and get to know each other, no matter where they stand politically or whether they work outside or inside the home.’

(Bjarnfreðsdóttir, 1975, KSS 1, A1). These words are symptomatic of one dominant discourse among the organizers through the process as they worked very hard in promoting the actions and discursively creating an inclusive atmosphere that allowed for solidarity among women despite their differences – usually depicted as the difference between urban and rural women, political views, occupation (class) and whether they worked outside the homes or considered themselves primarily as housewives. The plurality and somewhat conflictual expressions of solidarity preceding and during the WDO resonate with Jónasdóttir (1991, p. 51), who argues that although gendered ‘commonality’ might be thin and always defined and circumscribed by other elements – sisterhood can be very powerful.

As we discussed earlier, many representatives of the associations and groups that united behind the WDO actions, including some representatives from the trade unions, resisted the 'strike' framing. Some argued that it would be unpropitious to call it a strike because of the legal frameworks around industrial disputes. Men would technically not be allowed to step into women's jobs if it was a strike, while that was an essential part of the idea. Furthermore, employers could turn against the actions altogether if the framework was too militant (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980; Einarsdóttir, 1986). Finally, as many brought up during the initial stages of the organizing if it would technically be a strike, it would be a wildcat strike. It would position some women in a precarious situation, risking losing their livelihood – as was the case in Sweden. Thus, several reasons were behind the decision to officially name the actions 'Women's Day Off' and not a women's strike. Redstocking members have on several occasions described that the change of name from 'women's strike' to 'day off' was mainly because many right-wing women would never have agreed to agitate for a strike (Árnadóttir, 2011). Furthermore, the Redstockings and many left-wing papers insisted on calling the action a strike throughout the process. At the same time, the conservative and liberal strands in the organizing team and the conservative media used the official term 'day off.' However, most Redstockings defended the decision to reframe the action as necessary to enhance participation. The term 'strike' was considered inspirational for some women, while probably the majority would not participate in such action. This reframing likely contributed to the broad support the action received.

Moreover, the fact that the WDO was promoted as a significant historical event, which would, in any case, only last for one single day, most employers went along with

the idea, and some even gave many women the day off (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980, p. 53).<sup>4</sup> Somewhat, perhaps, making it less threatening. As one of the Redstocking members recounts: ‘The fate of the Redstocking movement’s idea of a women’s strike [...] was a disappointment [...] by calling the actions ‘a day off’, many of us felt that the strike weapon was made meaningless. It resulted in our diminished enthusiasm to work on the whole thing.’ Nevertheless, she concluded her remarks in a much more positive tone, emphasizing the symbolic power of the seemingly total solidarity: ‘I think none of us had had the faintest idea that such a massive group of women would gather from all directions. All of our tumbling about the last years was showing results; women did show solidarity and saw that things could be changed!’ (Óskarsdóttir in Árnadóttir 2011, p. 155).

### **Concluding discussion**

None of the two strikes produced what Du Plessis & Snitow termed a ‘pure solidarity’ of sisterhood or a ‘we-ness’ based solely on gender or class. Instead, sisterhood was articulated, practiced, challenged, and rearticulated throughout both strikes, albeit in different ways. As we have demonstrated, in the ASAB cleaners’ strike, the women started out mainly identifying as workers and primarily entered relations of solidarity with other male workers. However, due to a combination of lack of support from the union, courtship of the women’s movement, and the demand for a univocal identification with the workers’ movement from some male workers, the women strikers gradually incorporated gender in their ideological framing of the strike as well

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<sup>4</sup> Women who were employed on a permanent basis both in the public and private sector even received full salary for the day in most cases, however, those women who were hourly employed did not receive pay that day if they did not turn up at work. According to one of the organisers, “this exemplifies how the injustice always hits the precarious the most” (Steinþórsdóttir, 1980, p. 53).

as in their own political identity. This partial shift to a feminist framing supports the thesis about the uneasy relationship between women workers and male-dominated unions and can be seen as an example of what Briskin calls gendered labor militancies. Suddenly, women who during this period were rarely seen as radical working-class subjects were speaking out about their economic and social situation and united as both workers *and* women.

Interestingly, the ASAB cleaners on strike were somewhat caught between their ‘supporters,’ i.e., their working-class male peers and the feminists. Furthermore, despite friction between the women’s and the worker’s movements, the radical feminist groups supporting the cleaners combined the category of class with the one of sex quite unproblematically. Similarly, the women’s unions in Iceland and the Redstockings were accused by actors on the radical left for failing to identify the real opponent of working-class women, i.e., the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system, and for wrongly targeting men in general with a cross-class women’s strike.

As has been noted by other scholars, questions concerning ethnicity and sexuality, or other differentiating factors were marginal in Nordic feminist politics and theory up until the millennium (De los Reyes et al., 2003; Dahl et al., 2016). However, the ASAB strikers indirectly took ethnicity into consideration by recruiting translators to ensure that workers who did not speak Swedish could participate in meetings, although the question of ethnicity was not part of the ideological framework. Concerning the WDO, women’s common interests were emphasized, while differences based on class and an urban/rural distinction were certainly acknowledged on the practical level (this was before Iceland had any measurable immigration, and thus ethnic differences were not relevant in the same sense as in Sweden). This finding points to the importance of not only looking at the discursive framing of movements but also their

concrete struggles and political practice (Alcanlde-Golzález et al., 2022).

While solidarity in the ASAB strike was constructed in relation to class and gender equally, women's solidarity was more prominent in the Icelandic strike, albeit - as we have shown - issues of work and women's reproductive role in capitalist society were frequently brought to the fore by central actors in the strike. The WDO, a.k.a. the 'Icelandic women's strike,' was a protest against the outspread oppression of women in society in general rather than being based on a concrete situation, such as a workplace conflict - taking place at that time. Since it was limited to one day, it was essential to gather as many women as possible in order to be effective. This understandable emphasis on making the event a massive manifestation meant that differences between women were downplayed, and the demands were somewhat vague. In other words, the sisterhood articulated in the symbolic strike was very much a strategic form of sisterhood, where differences were marginalized - but not disowned - in order to mobilize a significant number of women. As we have argued, the action's primary purpose was to build bridges and create alliances between different groups of women. The ASAB strike was instead based on a concrete situation of economic exploitation at a workplace, where the gendered dimensions of the class struggle became more visible throughout the strike and where the alliances with both workers and women had the function of serving the women strikers in their concrete political struggle rather than - on a more conceptual level - create a collective political identity. Furthermore, while consciousness-raising in relation to both class and gender-based oppression was partly an unintended effect of the ASAB cleaners' strike, consciousness-raising concerning gender-based oppression and discrimination was the main idea behind the WDO in Iceland.

While this article does not set out to review whether the strikes were successful,

it is worth considering whether this attempt of the Icelandic feminist movement to mobilize as many women as possible contributed to the mainstreaming and depoliticization of the WDO. Admittedly, the action has not contributed to the restructuring of Icelandic society that many actors in the strike hoped for. However, the success in participation contributed to the legacy and inspirational effects that the WDO, also known internationally as the ‘Icelandic women’s strike,’ has had internationally – somewhat symbolizing the dream of women’s solidarity and collective power as political subjects. In this sense, sparks from the past might be ignited to set fire to the present or the future.

Our contribution in this article has been to provide a contrastive analysis of two different cases of ‘women’s strikes’ in which articulations of collective identities developed organically and strategically, respectively. Furthermore, we demonstrated how unexpected solidarity work across classes and groups can be enormously effective in a concrete manner, as in the ASAB strike. However, thin and sometimes conflictual solidarity, as appeared preceding, during, and after the WDO, can also be powerful and have symbolic effects in unexpected ways while simultaneously making visible differences in terms of concrete situations, interests, and political ideology. A task for further research would be to compare contemporary feminist strikes with the Icelandic WDO on the one hand and, on the other hand, to explore the relationship between current industrial disputes in female-dominated sectors and the women’s strike movement.

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