

# Single women who emigrated from Iceland to North America, 1870–1914

Forgotten women with agency?

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In the period 1820–1950, about 2.9 million people emigrated from the Nordic countries.<sup>1</sup> This article will consider the unmarried women who emigrated from Iceland to North America in the period 1870–1914.<sup>2</sup> In terms of emigration from Europe, proportionally the greatest number of people came from Ireland, but both Norway and Iceland were not far behind.<sup>3</sup> Those who emigrated from Iceland amounted to 23 per cent of the country's total population.<sup>4</sup> The high proportion of women was a particular feature of Icelandic emigration. As a rule, men had a 'higher rate of emigration than women in the Nordic countries', although there were deviations from this pattern;<sup>5</sup> women, however, accounted for 50.7 per cent of the Icelandic emigrants. According to the Icelandic historians Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Steinthór Heidarsson, this ratio was 'high and remarkably stable' in comparison to other countries.<sup>6</sup> No figures exist concerning the proportion of unmarried women, but it may be assumed that the number was high, since the general proportion of unmarried women in Icelandic society at this time was large.

Being single was a factor that affected the circumstances and prospects of women who emigrated. The role of married women in their new countries was predetermined to a far larger degree, consisting of care for the home and the family. Single women's prospects, on the other hand, were more precarious, involving greater uncertainty about their livelihoods and future lives.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it has been suggested that the difference between emigrating when married with children, compared to emigrating as a single person, was greater for women than for men. 'In a period when the married woman's situation essentially was defined by her position in the family', it can be assumed that the decision to emigrate, like the experience of emigration itself, was different for married women and single women.<sup>8</sup> It must be borne in mind that 'wage work was not central to most white women's lives'. Marriage must therefore be viewed as an 'economic opportunity' for women.<sup>9</sup> The process of migration was also structured by a 'variety of social relationships' such as class and nationality.<sup>10</sup>

The main purpose of this article is twofold. First, in order to provide an overview of the phenomenon, we will briefly discuss existing studies of single women who emigrated to North America. Second, we will argue that a certain group of women has been forgotten, both in the history of Icelandic emigration and in Icelandic historical accounts of women and gender – the single women who emigrated to Canada and the US, who belonged neither to the class of government officials nor to the ‘lower classes’ or domestic servants.<sup>11</sup> Our aim is to discuss the women’s social position and how they are best positioned in historical research. We suggest that these women had a certain ‘capital’,<sup>12</sup> and that they also had resources, spanning education, a career or an employment history of some kind, or familial associations, for example. Our study is based on historical sources that have thus far been somewhat underutilised in the field of women’s and gender history, namely short biographies of emigrants such as those found in the *Vestur-íslenzkar æviskrár* (the biographical records of the ‘Western Icelanders’, the Icelandic emigrants to North America) and obituaries in the Icelandic newspapers published in Canada, the *Lögberg* and the *Heimskringla*.

## Themes in the literature

### *Iceland*

The country that the Icelandic women left behind was traditional, rural society with a very small population. Increases in the population between 1820 and 1880, when it reached 72,445, took place without any fundamental change in the means of livelihood or conditions of labour. Urbanisation was very slow, and over 90 per cent of Icelanders lived by farming.<sup>13</sup> In the mid nineteenth century, there began a period that has been called ‘the crisis in rural society’. It became harder for people to set up their own households, and so increasing numbers became household servants for life and never got married.<sup>14</sup> For some, the solution to this crisis was to emigrate to North America, although people who were well-off also emigrated.<sup>15</sup>

Most emigrants from Iceland went to Canada, contrary to the trend in almost all other European countries, from where the majority went to the US. The primary Icelandic settlement was in Manitoba, and soon Winnipeg ‘had the largest settlement of Icelanders in America’.<sup>16</sup> They settled in other places in Canada as well. Icelanders also emigrated to the US, and in 1910 a substantial number were living there too.<sup>17</sup>

There was considerable international scholarly interest in emigrant history in the 1960s and 1970s, characterised by economic and social approaches

based on quantitative analyses.<sup>18</sup> One of the Icelandic outcomes of this movement was the publication in 1983 of *A Record of Icelandic Emigrants 1870–1914* by the Icelandic historian Jónius H. Kristinsson.<sup>19</sup> The *Record* provides a summary of the names of those who emigrated, along with their sex, age, place in their family, and the year they left.<sup>20</sup> There has also been important research on this period by the Icelandic historian Helgi Skúli Kjartansson. This, together with the *Record*, formed part of a Nordic research project on emigration from the Scandinavian countries to North America.<sup>21</sup>

Such quantitative methods are now thought by many scholars to be too narrow. The Norwegian historian Odd S. Lovoll, for example, writes that the ‘human factor may easily disappear in a macro view of this historical phenomenon and in its statistical dimensions’.<sup>22</sup> This also means that it is important to balance the general ideas found in material from official sources with individual experiences and stories.<sup>23</sup> The Icelandic historian Vilhelm Vilhelmsson has recently contended that the past decade has seen a shift in research on Icelandic emigration to North America. He writes that the lives of the emigrants, ‘their identities and myth-making have been scrutinized from a considerably more critical angle’ than had been previously the case.<sup>24</sup>

### Women

Women and emigration from the Nordic countries seem to be a rather under-researched field. The historian Lars Olsson wrote in 2001 that the history ‘surrounding the Swedish men and women who settled in America’ had tended to be written according to ‘an international pattern of interpretation’.<sup>25</sup> Citing the sociologist Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, he stated that this was where ‘largely male scholars’ treated the ‘category of “woman” as passive followers of “the real migrant”, the male labour migrant or political exile’.<sup>26</sup>

This is in line with the historiography of Icelandic emigration. The historian Laurie K. Bertram pointed out the contradiction in the fact that ‘Icelandic Canadian historiography generally prides itself on Iceland’s history of comparatively progressive property and political rights for women’, but at the same time, important female figures ‘occupy the outskirts of mainstream history and commemoration’. This is true, for example, of Salome Halldorson (1887–1970), who served in the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba from 1936 to 1941 and who was ‘one of the foremost female leaders in the Icelandic Canadian community in Manitoba during the 1930s and 40s’ along with ‘her other well-known female contemporaries’.<sup>27</sup>

However, according to the Norwegian historian Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, changes are now taking place. Discussing research on Norwegian emigration, Joranger claims that ‘Women’s gender history, which has been

largely neglected in former studies, in recent years has acquired a more prominent place in immigration and ethnic studies.<sup>28</sup> He specifically refers to the book *Norwegian American Women*, published in 2011, the sole subject of which is the participation by Norwegian women in emigration, and their role in their new society.

The historian Ann-Sofie Ohlander has conducted pioneering work on the emigration of women from Sweden. She writes that in the period 1851–1908, the gender proportions were 833 women for every 1,000 men who emigrated. Looking at the proportion of single emigrant women to single emigrant men, it rose dramatically during this period. In 1851–1860, 462 women in this category emigrated from Sweden, against every 1,000 men. In 1891–1900, the number of women had risen to 981; thus, their numbers were almost equal.<sup>29</sup>

The higher rates of family-based emigration from rural areas at the beginning of the emigration period changed to increased individual emigration from towns in the 1880s and 1890s. This went hand in hand with increased emigration by women, which was usually higher from towns than from rural areas.<sup>30</sup> Migration within the home country ('step migration'), which was more common among women than men, explains this to some extent. Women tended to move to larger cities to find work before making the jump overseas.<sup>31</sup> The study by Icelandic historian Ólöf Gardarsdóttir on the connection between the growth of coastal villages in Iceland and emigration to North America indicates that this pattern can be found in Iceland as well.<sup>32</sup>

### *Single women's agency*

The historian Joy K. Lintelman sheds important light on the situation of single women who emigrated from Sweden to North America. She has examined letters they wrote home, and found that since they had more time to correspond, they wrote more about 'public issues', in addition to personal ones, than married women did.<sup>33</sup> Her study provides an interesting insight into the agency of single women. Lintelman has written about a particular Swedish woman, Mina Anderson, who emigrated when young and single, and whose memoirs became one of the sources for Vilhelm Moberg's novels.<sup>34</sup> She discusses the widespread influence of Kristina Nilsson in Moberg's novel about Swedish female emigrants, as a woman who did not want to leave her country, never adapted, and who suffered from 'homesickness conquered only in death'. According to Lintelman, this 'Kristina archetype' ignores 'the majority of Swedish emigrant women, like Mina, who made

their own decisions to leave' and 'achieved many of the goals they had set for themselves in immigrating'.<sup>35</sup>

The historian Lars Olsson has also written about a young emigrant woman, Evelina Johansdotter, who was in constant negotiation with her surroundings. In addition to the obvious difficulties facing a young, working emigrant, he also describes her as an agent who actively assessed the advantages and disadvantages of the possibilities open to her.<sup>36</sup> This leads to another important theme in the research on emigration by single women from the Nordic countries, which at the same time sheds light on their agency in their work and working conditions. Being a maid or 'in service' was by far the commonest occupation. In 1900, 61.5 per cent of women in the US who had been born in Sweden gave it as their occupation,<sup>37</sup> a proportion that seems to be in line with the situation in Canada concerning Scandinavian women in general. The historian Eva St Jean writes that according to 'Census Canada, in 1931 58 per cent of Scandinavian female workers were employed in the service industry, mostly in domestic service, but also in restaurants or boarding houses'.<sup>38</sup>

The historian Lars Ljungmark studied the structure of the population of the city of Winnipeg in Canada over a twenty-year period, from 1881 to 1901, by country of birth. He found that 90 per cent of Icelandic women (86 women in total) were 'unmarried and a large majority of them served in a family'.<sup>39</sup> Among the Icelandic women in Canada, Ljungmark found a high proportion of single women working as maids.

Women's work 'existed within a gendered space'.<sup>40</sup> Women's opportunities for waged work were limited. Paid labour performed by white women in British Columbia was 'largely confined to a handful of characteristically female areas'.<sup>41</sup> These varied in content and status. Women, for example, could work as laundresses and in restaurants, or be midwives or teachers, this last being the primary professional occupation open to women in the period between 1840 and 1920.<sup>42</sup>

### A forgotten stratum of women – historical sources

The fact that relatively little has been written about emigration from Iceland and the Nordic countries from a gendered point of view makes it important to consider the questions of how to approach the project, the methodology to apply, and which sources to use, and more specifically the types of sources available for the theme, the sort of evidence they provide, and what methods should be used to analyse them.<sup>43</sup> This is all the more necessary because the source material for emigration is vast, including material produced on both sides of the Atlantic, including newspapers, magazines, biographies,

written local tales of various kinds, parish registers, censuses, immigration records, emigrants' letters home, and photographs of the emigrants. These sources provide very different and varied types of information and insight.

One task at hand has been to establish the fundamental gendered characteristics of these sources. It seems, for example, that the majority of biographies and letters sent home were written by men.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, an important concern has been to obtain a qualitative insight into the lives of single emigrant women, while at the same time establishing a structural overview of their social position. Gender as a factor easily disappears in the traditional consideration of these sources. In order to balance the traditional view, we thus attempt to bring women's experiences and stories to the fore. Guided by questions such as those outlined above, we have focused on primary sources that we would argue should be examined more closely in research into the history of women and gender: short biographies, such as those to be found in the *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* and newspaper obituaries.

The *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* contains short biographies of a considerable number of single women who emigrated to North America. We have identified women in the *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* who were unmarried and who provided for themselves, at least for some period after their arrival in Canada or the US.<sup>45</sup> Thus far, we have gone through the first volume and have not yet found any women who worked as domestic servants throughout their lives, despite the large number of female domestics. They seem to be largely invisible in the sources used in this project, although not entirely so in the history of women and gender, as some limited research has been done on them.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, it is important to recognise that these women did not generally belong to the highest layers of Icelandic society and so were not part of the stratum of Icelandic government officials. This observation also applies to the Icelandic Canadian newspapers that carried obituaries of Icelandic immigrants, including a number for women who were unmarried when they emigrated from Iceland.<sup>47</sup>

These examples, which will be discussed further below, seem to present a picture of women that has not been given prominence within the field of women's history in Iceland. We contend that they show a certain variety in women's circumstances and modes of life, as well as a form of agency or scope for influencing their own destiny. The *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* and the obituaries contain examples of women who learned a trade in order to support themselves before they went to Canada, or after their arrival, and who especially trained as seamstresses. Then there is an example of a woman who was educated at the Women's School in Reykjavík and who supported herself in Canada for some time by teaching.<sup>48</sup> There are also women who pursued an entrepreneurial path, women who led a mobile

life travelling between countries, women who were obviously endowed with some extraordinary personal qualities, and, not least, women who could count on good relations or contacts. Thus, members of the forgotten stratum of women become visible in their own right, and not simply in the shadow cast by their men, whether their husbands, their fathers, or others.

### *Theoretical approach*

As our aim is to explore the social and cultural status of the ‘forgotten women’ – the single Icelandic women who emigrated to North America in 1870–1914 – we consider their background, education, relationships, and career or employment history. We attempt to position single Icelandic women who emigrated within the field of women’s and gender history, to analyse and understand these sources, and to create a place for them in a gendered theoretical framework. The work of the historian Joan Wallach Scott is an important point of departure. In the words of the historian Betty A. Bergland, it ‘lays out theoretical framework for analyzing how gender shapes both history and historical writing’.<sup>49</sup> Scott views the concept of gender as a constituent element of social relationships between men and women and as the primary symbol of power relationships. Gender shapes the identity of men and women, which in turn shapes and reflects society. History is thus enacted in the field of gender.<sup>50</sup>

Historical sources such as those we have discussed here can be described as ‘written narratives based on experience’. In their book on biographical meanings in life narratives, the ethnologist Lena Marander-Eklund and the historian Ann-Catrin Östman write that they use the word ‘biographical’ to signify ‘biographies written by others as well as personally written life narratives and memoirs’.<sup>51</sup> They particularly emphasise two points of view. First, they stress the normative aspect of ‘biographisation’. The lines along which ‘a life is narrated and renarrated’ are often determined or already given, and thus ‘biographisation’ is strongly connected to the opinions of the time regarding ‘how a life should be lived and how it should be narrated.’ This means that there is a dimension of power to the biographical narrative.<sup>52</sup> Second, biography is also a personally ‘meaningful act’. To ‘biographise’ is to negotiate one’s position in society and to take upon oneself both agency and subjectivity.<sup>53</sup>

These two dimensions apply to the sources used in our study, since they certainly took shape within a normative framework and are hence of interest to our theoretical approach. ‘What is highlighted’ in an obituary ‘and what is omitted tells us not only what the author of the obituary considered important about the individuals but also what a particular culture values.’<sup>54</sup>

However, the form of the obituaries and the short biographies also offers the opportunity to write about the women's personal qualities and achievements. Hence, these sources are a site where it is possible to attribute agency and subjectivity to the individual. It is indeed possible to highlight women's diverse capacities, and it is clear that the obituarists and biographers often used this opportunity to depict the women's agency within the discursive framework that was open to them.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to refer to theories about life stories and their various cultural and social functions.<sup>56</sup> Life stories are 'interpreted history', and their purpose is to constitute the individual, as emphasised by the ethnologist Birgitta Svensson. It is 'the way in which the life is remembered and narrated that will form the biography'. This means that 'the biographic memory and the life story do not necessarily need to be the same as the lived life. On the other hand they form a surface knowledge, a story shaped in order to describe life as we ourselves or someone else wanted to formulate it.'<sup>57</sup> Life stories thus do not directly reflect the 'lived life' of the subject that they are written about, but they do 'play a role through *structuring the experience* created by the lived life'. As the historian Britt Liljewall, a life story helps in 'formulating ... and evaluating *new identities and roles*, and these are needed in a society under change'.<sup>58</sup>

By this approach, we attempt to move beyond the binary view of emigration as either liberation or exploitation, since we believe it to be a bit of both. Ann-Sofie Ohlander emphasises the liberating aspect of emigration and freedom from patriarchal oppression in the home country, something that maids in particular suffered from. Emigration was therefore an 'act of freedom' and 'the relative improvements they experienced seems clearly to have been greater than those which men experienced'.<sup>59</sup>

The observation that emigration resulted in 'relative improvements' seems to be important in terms of the emigration of single Icelandic women. Historians have written about the strict social ties that individuals were subject to in rural Icelandic society.<sup>60</sup> One example of such 'ties', or even the oppression of individuals, was the legislation on the position of servants 'that made it obligatory for all persons over the age of 16 not living in households of their own, or residing in a household of their parents, to seek positions as servants ... in other households'.<sup>61</sup> This has been referred to *vistarband* in Icelandic or 'labour bondage'.<sup>62</sup> It is necessary to bear these conditions in mind when assessing the changes in the women's situation.

It is also important to take into account research on the specific life conditions of women in Iceland. For instance, the fact that women formed the majority of the population and that a 'high percentage of women in nineteenth century Iceland never married'.<sup>63</sup> Women were more likely to remain

household servants for life than men were. Moreover, research findings reveal the subjugation of female servants in Iceland and the immense difference in the economic and social positions of male and female household servants.<sup>64</sup> This is important when comparing the lives of women in Iceland to the lives of women in a similar position in North America. Icelandic researchers have claimed that ‘wages were generally better in Canada, especially for women’.<sup>65</sup>

However, there was also another side to the coin. Research has emphasised that the emigrant women in North America entered a complex society with clear hierarchies based, for example, on ethnicity and race.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, some women seem to have suffered from exploitation in their new country. A question remains regarding how to treat this theme without assuming that women were in possession of agency that they did not actually have. These points of view (i.e. one that highlights ‘liberation’ and one that emphasises ‘exploitation’) are both therefore useful.

We seek to develop ‘a nuanced ... understanding of women’s subjection’ and not to assume beforehand some ‘overarching or absolute power of men over women, irrespective of place and time.’ The differentiation of the concept of power is important, as is the tracing of its origins. It is necessary to make men’s dominance visible without losing sight of women’s agency.<sup>67</sup> In the context of our theme, this means accounting for the possibility that women seemingly had to be actors in their own lives and to influence their surroundings.

Bourdieu’s concept of capital, as developed by the sociologist Beverly Skeggs, provides an opportunity to conceptualise and contextualise the subjectivities and the agency of single Icelandic emigrant women.<sup>68</sup> Skeggs elaborates on Bourdieu’s capital to encompass both structural aspects of class formation and the ‘micropolitics of power’.<sup>69</sup> While economic capital is a self-evident term, social capital in Bourdieu’s terminology comprises ‘resources based on connections and group membership ... generated through relationships’ such as family ties or ‘knowing the right people’.<sup>70</sup> Social capital in terms of family relations is a key aspect here as family ties were, and are, very strong in Iceland and for single women they could invoke strength based on social networks and relationships that can be converted into social status and, hence, symbolic capital. For single Icelandic women who emigrated, social capital was of importance for social promotion, not least being well connected in terms of kinship and family background.<sup>71</sup>

Education, cultural skills including literacy, a talent in verse craft or the authorship of books earned people a certain respect in Iceland.<sup>72</sup> Different forms of capital can be transformed into symbolic capital if they are ‘perceived and recognized as legitimate’.<sup>73</sup> Symbolic capital is a ‘non-material: an attribute, a faculty, a position or a possession which others within the social

space recognize as having value'.<sup>74</sup> People attain symbolic capital when the different forms of capital gain legitimacy and lend acknowledgement and respect to the holder. In the competition for status and power, people use whatever forms of capital they possess and have the opportunity to exercise.<sup>75</sup> All varieties of capital are context-specific and time-specific, have a relational character, and cannot be seen in isolation from one another. The overall configuration of different types of capital makes up the totality of the social position and resources that the individual manages to acquire and exercise.<sup>76</sup> The value of capital is never a given, since the hierarchy observed and the respect shown are subject to specific definitions. Gender power relations serve to condition how and what attributes are acknowledged in women and men, and therefore women and men can rarely compete for power and respect on the same grounds.

Another dimension to social capital in this respect is nationality and ethnicity, and hence the concept of transnationalism is important.<sup>77</sup> Instead of regarding the nation-state as the 'natural unit for research', we need to focus on how people or individuals experience themselves as being a part of two nation-states at the same time. Research on Icelandic emigrants to North America has to take this into account, as the Icelandic historian Ólafur Arnar Sveinsson has observed.<sup>78</sup> The 'Western Icelandic' construction of nationalist ideas is a prime example of a theme in which the transnationalist approach is vital. The immigrants in general 'were arriving at a moment when talk of nationalism and national identity was rife in Europe' and they carried diverse nationalistic affiliations with them.<sup>79</sup> A key theme in Icelandic national ideology, for example, was the 'resurrection' of the 'true Icelandic qualities' of the Golden Age.<sup>80</sup> The emigration of Icelanders to North America was embedded in such ideas.<sup>81</sup> Clearly, there was a strong connection between nationalist ideas and manliness.<sup>82</sup> As Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Frances Swyripa write, the immigrant women's lives were marked by complexities, 'conflicts and tensions that ... [they] experienced inside their families, within their ethnic communities, and in their relations with society at large'.<sup>83</sup> However, there is reason to believe that women who were able to position themselves favourably within the Icelandic Canadian ethnic ideology also derived certain benefits from their 'Icelandicness', for example, in form of social status within their community. A mastery of Icelandic nationality's main symbols, such as the written language, was an asset for both men and women. We can assume that the self-esteem and values of the single Icelandic women who emigrated, along with how they behaved as they went through life, would have depended on their specific Icelandic cultural capital.<sup>84</sup> Many of them managed to make use of their

nationality and origin in their new country (through their mastery of the Icelandic language, for example).

Against this background, we would argue that one group of women has slipped out of sight in the traditional historical treatment and in modern women's and gender history. They were not pioneers in any traditional sense, nor were they women's rights activists. They did not belong to the upper layers of society, and they were not related to significant historical male figures, who could have granted them historical status of, for example, devoted wife (like Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, 1804–1879, the wife of the Icelandic national hero, Jón Sigurdsson). They were not particularly determined or outstanding, nor were they able to command respect in the same way as men (like Halldóra Gudbrandsdóttir, 1573–1658, the daughter of Bishop Gudbrandur Thorláksson) or they were daughters who met a tragic end (like Ragnheidur Brynjólfsdóttir, c.1641–1663, the daughter of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson). They did not go down in history as unique women with traditionally male attributes (like Thurídur Chairman, 1777–1863, the most famous fisherwoman in Iceland's history), they were not poetesses (like Vatnsenda-Rósa, 1795–1855), and they did not figure in the Icelandic sagas (like, for example, Hallgerður *langbrók* or Bergthóra Skarphédinsdóttir). They did not even belong to the working class, which is certainly a defined group in women's history. This means that we do not remember them as an integral part of the history of the men who have 'shaped history', and it is most likely the explanation for the fact that generally they seem not to be represented by extensive samples of personal letters or diaries. They are a forgotten stratum of women. In the following, we will provide examples that offer an insight into the experiences and stories of individual women from this forgotten stratum. We will discuss seven women, four of whom were young and unmarried when they emigrated, and three who were older and either separated or widowed. Who were they, then, these women and what do the historical sources tell us, either directly or indirectly, about them?

### Thematic discussion – examples of women's stories

The sources tell of Guðný Thorvaldsdóttir (1871–1946), a woman who had been in service, working in renowned places in Iceland, and who then moved to Scotland 'where she served in guest houses for eight years'.<sup>85</sup> After that, she moved to Canada and settled in Winnipeg, ending her life in Vancouver where she died 'in the home of C. A. Sutherland, the secretary of the mayor', where she took care of his aged mother.<sup>86</sup> The sources also give an account of the life of Elín Sigurdardóttir Hall (1883–1960), who grew up in Skagafjörður in Northern Iceland, but who moved to Canada in 1900 when

she was 17. Once there she began by working in a restaurant, but she went on to train as a seamstress. Never marrying, she supported herself by that profession and was moreover active in an amateur theatre in Winnipeg<sup>87</sup> as well as being a good singer.<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, we learn about Guðrídur Gísladóttir (1837–1918), who was also born in Skagafjörður.<sup>89</sup> She was a woman who was endowed with determination, as most of these women seem to have been, and with good relations. In 1862, Guðrídur married Fridrik Stefánsson, an MP, and they had three children. However, they separated (a fact that is omitted from her obituary), and in 1876 Guðrídur left for Canada with her son, Fridrik, who had been born in 1862.<sup>90</sup> In North America, she ‘had to support herself and her son by her work’. The first years were obviously hard, but things got better for her ‘because already at a young age her son Fridrik got a well-paid position and she was able to lead a carefree life after that.’<sup>91</sup>

Kristrún Sveinungadóttir (1835–1917) was another woman who had a rather special history in Canada – and a correspondingly long obituary in the journal *Almanak Ólafs S. Thorgeirssonar*. She was born in Nordur-Thingeyjarsýsla in Northern Iceland. She married in Iceland and had a daughter, but separated from her husband in 1862. Before she left the country, Kristrún was a domestic in a prominent home, that of Arnljótur Ólafsson at Bægisá,<sup>92</sup> a clergyman and MP, and his wife Hólmfríður Thorsteinsdóttir. Kristrún obviously developed strong ties with the family, and her obituary especially mentions a letter she wrote to her former mistress in 1901, some 25 years after she left Iceland. Hólmfríður wrote in reply, ‘I thank you cordially for a good and lovely letter from August this summer. You cannot believe how glad I was to receive it. I find in it your rare and unbreakable faithfulness to me and my people, the love and loyalty which so few people are endowed with.’<sup>93</sup> Kristrún Sveinungadóttir arrived in Winnipeg in 1876 and started working in a guesthouse, which was only the beginning of an extraordinary future. She became the owner of two building sites and built a house on one of them, according to her obituary becoming only the second Icelander to build a house in Winnipeg. She was also active in various societies; for example, she was involved in receiving and supporting immigrants from Iceland.<sup>94</sup>

All these women took the step of emigrating alone to a new country. They had certain capacities, which are reflected in the way they supported themselves by their trades and even by larger entrepreneurial achievements. Some of them also had artistic talents. Hence, they possessed cultural capital in the form of their varied knowledge and skills. They had social ties in the shape of strong family relations or friendship, which constituted an asset in their new country and which reflected their social capital. We will now present a more detailed account of three women.

*Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir, an entrepreneurial, professional woman*

On 28 January 1909, *Lögberg* published an obituary of Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir, who ‘passed away on November 6<sup>th</sup> at her home, 691 Victor Street in Winnipeg and was buried on November 9<sup>th</sup> ... in the Brookside cemetery’.<sup>95</sup> Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir was born in eastern Iceland, in Bakkagerdi in Borgarfjörður in Nordur-Múlasýsla, in 1856. She was the daughter of Ketill Jónsson and Sesselja Jónsdóttir, who lived there ‘for quite a number of years’. According to her obituary, in 1878, when she was 22, she moved with her parents and siblings to the village of Seydisfjörður in eastern Iceland. There she met her future husband, Finnbogi Sigmundsson, ‘a skilful carpenter’, and in the spring of 1881 they were married.<sup>96</sup> Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir lived in the village of Seydisfjörður for the majority of her adult life, some 25 years, until she emigrated to Canada.<sup>97</sup> The couple had three children, two sons and a daughter. In 1895, Jóhanna lost her husband, while her daughter had died at the age of only 2, ‘and that was the sorrow which she remembered most clearly’.<sup>98</sup>

Jóhanna can be described as an entrepreneurial and professional woman who seems to have worked and thus supported herself and her family her whole life. Soon after their marriage, Jóhanna and her husband Finnbogi started a restaurant (*greidasala*), which they ran for some years.<sup>99</sup> Clearly, she was not the legal owner of the restaurant, since married women were not considered financially competent at this time;<sup>100</sup> however, it is equally clear that she ran it along with her husband.

The historian Lori Ann Lahlum, writing about businesses owned by single women, states that ‘Married women, too, owned businesses.’ She takes the example of a couple, Martin and Gertrude Poyeson, in Idaho who ‘owned and operated a boarding house’. The census, however, ‘listed Martin as the “boarding house keeper”, while Gertrude appeared to not be ‘gainfully employed’, due to the fact that ‘Gendered notions of work and proprietorship’ influenced how occupational status was recorded in censuses. Still, the success of a business such as a boarding house depended on the ‘skill with which the women completed ... domestic tasks’ such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. So, the person who ‘truly ensured’ that the boarding house business of the couple functioned successfully ‘was Gertrude Poyeson’.<sup>101</sup>

Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir seems to have been a woman who enjoyed a good social position in Seydisfjörður. According to her obituary, she was seen as being ‘in the rank of the foremost women’ in the village ‘and she participated considerably in the social life’. It is a sign of her standing that, in 1898, when a hospital was founded in the village, Jóhanna was one of the women who applied to be a director of the institution. ‘That was regarded as



Jónhanna Ketilsdóttir with her husband and son. She emigrated as a widow from Seydisfjörður in East Iceland in 1903. The East Iceland Archives (Héradsskjalasafn Austfirdinga).

a fine position of responsibility and the result was that her application was accepted.<sup>102</sup> In the four years that she spent as the head of the hospital and ‘by her work there, she achieved the confidence and respect of the people’, not least of the hospital doctor, Kristján Kristjánsson, ‘who was cautious and successful’ and who ‘did not have other people than her to assist him with the anaesthetization of patients who had to be operated on, something which happened regularly’.<sup>103</sup>

However, according to the obituary, it gradually became clear to Jónhanna ‘that this work did not suit very well to her health. It seemed to be too difficult for her to be a witness to diseases and death. And in spite of the fact that she felt well in many ways in these years, and took a keen interest in the welfare of the institution ... she resigned from her position in the spring 1903.’ Then, she began to think about emigrating to Canada. There she had

a brother and her son, Sigurdur (who had arrived here two years before), who would receive her. At last she said farewell to everything which she held dear in her native country and moved this same summer here to Winnipeg with her son Guttormur who was 11 years old and lived since then with him and her brother Jón here in the town.<sup>104</sup>

In an advertisement in *Lögberg* in November 1904, a woman by the name of Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir, living at 668 Victor Street, announced her sewing service, ‘especially for children and young people, for a fair price’, and also that she had space for two young women in need of board and lodging.<sup>105</sup> Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir from Seydisfjörður lived at 691 Victor Street and it is very likely that this was one and the same person.<sup>106</sup> Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir was a woman who was able to act on her own initiative to carve out possibilities and support herself and her family throughout her life. She was respected and acknowledged in Iceland before she emigrated and, hence, had cultural capital that facilitated her settlement in a new country.

*Anna Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir Sigbjörnsson,  
a cultured woman with connections*

Anna Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir Sigbjörnsson ‘passed away in her home near Leslie, Sask., April 24<sup>th</sup>. She had been born in 1876 in Grund in Jökuldalur in Nordur-Múlasýsla. Her parents were Gudmundur Jónsson, of the Hauksstadir and Hróaldsstadir family in the Vopnafjörður, and Anna Margrét Thorsteinsdóttir, of the Melar family in Fljótisdalur. Anna was ‘with her parents’ until she was 18. After that, she was ‘more or less away from home for long periods’, and one winter she stayed in Reykjavík, learning to be a seamstress. Seamstresses were a new class of professional women who appeared in Iceland around 1860, and learning a trade like sewing was certainly a step towards increased autonomy.<sup>107</sup> In spring 1903, Anna moved ‘to America’ with her sister, Jóna, where they settled in Winnipeg. She was then 27. In the winter 1904–1905, she married Sigbjörn Sigbjörnsson from Vopnafjörður in Iceland, who survived her. ‘They lived in Winnipeg until 1908 when they settled down near Leslie.’<sup>108</sup>



Anna Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir Sigbjörnsson was a well connected woman with a talent for the written word. The East Iceland Archives (Héradsskjalasafn Austfirðinga).

apart from her sister, Jóna, who was married to Loftur Jörundsson, a master builder in Winnipeg, and her brother, Páll, who was a farmer in Leslie, it mentions another brother, Thorsteinn, who was ‘married to Ragnhildur Jónsdóttir, the daughter of Jón from Sledbrjót, a Member of Parliament.’ The memory of Anna is also firmly placed in a nationalist discourse, since she is depicted as one of the ‘most true Icelandic settlers’ of a generation that was now passing away.<sup>109</sup>

The obituary stated that Anna was a ‘rare woman’, being beautiful, intelligent, and popular. Of course, it can be difficult to interpret such statements, but it is clear that she had a talent that was highly regarded in the Icelandic community: she was skilled in verse-making and crafted ‘many a witty verse and poem’ when she was young in Iceland.<sup>110</sup> Clearly, she did not abandon this activity altogether when she moved to Canada, as she recited a poem of her own composition at a golden wedding in Leslie in 1946.<sup>111</sup> She also seems to have engaged in discussions about contemporary Icelandic literature, as can be seen in a letter to her friends in which she expressed her opinion on the controversial novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (*Independent People*) by the future Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness.<sup>112</sup>

Anna seems not only to have been a woman with a talent for the written word, she had also relations among a kind of Icelandic ‘literary community’. In his book, *The Saskatchewan Icelanders*, Walter J. Lindal writes about Leslie in the early twentieth century, and states that it ‘became at once a cultural center and remained such for a number of years’. The reason for this, according to Lindal, was that several figures who lived there were ‘endowed with literary gifts much above the average in any community’ and they ‘led in creating a literary atmosphere which spread far beyond the limits of the district itself.’ One of the people he mentions was Mrs Rannveig Sigbjörnsson, who was married to Anna’s brother-in-law.<sup>113</sup> Anna had close family ties to other artists apart from Rannveig Sigbjörnsson. Her son, Haukur Stefánsson, became a painter and her brother, Björgvin Gudmundsson, the author of the obituary, was a composer.<sup>114</sup> Anna Gudmundsdóttir Sigbjörnsson thus seems to have been a woman with considerable social and cultural capital.

*Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir, a knowledgeable professional*

On 23 September 1926, *Lögberg* published an obituary of ‘Ingibjörg Björnsson, a nurse.’ She had passed away in Selkirk, Manitoba, on 25 April the same year.<sup>115</sup> Ingibjörg was born in 1873<sup>116</sup> at Húsey in Hróarstunga in Nordur-Múlasýsla, the daughter of ‘Björn Hallsson farmer in Húsey and his wife Jóhanna Björnsdóttir.’ They were both descendants, as the obituary emphasises, of ‘prominent farmers from the East.’ When Ingibjörg was 19, she

went to Reykjavík to learn midwifery. She was obviously regarded as eminently suited to this profession because she was ‘encouraged to do so by the local government’. In 1896, she completed her training ‘with a favourable testimonial’ and then came back to East Iceland, where she worked as a midwife in different areas until the spring 1903, when she emigrated to Canada.<sup>117</sup>

Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir ‘worked in the same field when she came to the west, in addition to nursing patients in their homes’, something which she did with a great skill.<sup>118</sup> When she died in 1926, she had thus worked as a professional woman in Winnipeg for 24 years. From the descriptions of her, it can seemingly be deduced that she was skilled at her profession and had personal qualities that were useful in her work. A short death announcement describes her as an ‘extremely fine and popular woman’,<sup>119</sup> while according to the obituary she was also noted for her humour.

More interestingly, however, she had been able to acquire ‘considerable more knowledge ... than was usual for young farm girls.’ This was due to her own desire to learn, because ‘there was hardly any teaching other than the homes where able to provide.’ Yet, she ‘could never be without’ reading, and this reading was seemingly a part of her own personal education, since she only read the best at hand.<sup>120</sup> From this, we can conclude that Ingibjörg had social capital in terms of a strong family background, as well as cultural capital revealed in her eagerness to learn and her nuanced taste in reading. As an ‘extremely fine and popular woman’, she also seems to have been respected and, hence, had symbolic capital.

## Conclusions

In Nordic research on emigration, women’s life stories and experiences are still an underdeveloped area and there is a lack of research on emigration from a gendered perspective. The same is true of Icelandic research. In this article, we have set out to contribute this field. We have argued that a certain group of women has been forgotten in the history of Icelandic emigration, and also in Icelandic women’s and gender history. This group comprised the single emigrant women who belonged neither to the highest layers of Icelandic society nor to the ‘lower classes’ or domestic servants.



Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir emigrated in 1903 and worked as a professional in Winnipeg for 24 years. The East Iceland Archives (Héradsskjalasafn Austfirdinga)

We have claimed that certain underutilised historical sources are crucial in making these women – and their social position – visible. These sources are obituaries in the Icelandic newspapers in Canada and short biographies of the emigrants such as those found in the *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár*.

These sources make single emigrant women's life histories and agency visible. Although we do not believe that our sources reflect a simple relation to 'reality', we would still argue that they shed light on lived lives to a certain extent and thus enable us to unravel the women's agency and subjectivity. It is indeed possible to highlight the diverse abilities of these women, and it is clear that the authors of the two highlighted types of source often used this opportunity to depict the women's agency within the discursive framework that was open to them.

We have found that these women possessed certain resources that we conceptualise as capital. They had capacities in terms of knowledge and skills that made them able to support themselves. They also had social ties, not least with male relatives and friends, which constituted social capital for women in a male-dominated society. By understanding these ties in terms of capital, we make them visible as constructed and perpetuated instead of 'natural' and, thus, unconceptualised. We portray the women as persons in their own right and not as simply an addendum to the men they were related to. They had cultural skills such as artistic abilities or verse-making, and some of them were socially respected. By this method, we have managed to highlight the subjectivity and agency of these women, as well as how they made use of their resources and capital in a creative manner.

We have traced the life histories and experiences of three women. However, they are only examples of the large pool of female emigrants who took the step of leaving their own country in the hope of a better future. We have discussed these three women in order to illustrate how they were able to act on their own initiative in many respects, both to carve out space for themselves as individuals and to support themselves and their families. They all had social capital or cultural capital, or indeed both, to varying extents. We hope that this approach can be of both methodological and theoretical value in future research in this field, as a contribution to the history of women and gender in addition to the history of emigration in general.

## Ogifta isländska kvinnor som utvandrade till Nordamerika 1870–1914. Glömda kvinnors aktörskap?

Bland de nordbor som utvandrade till Nordamerika under tidsperioden 1870 till 1914 var många kvinnor. Detta gäller i synnerhet de isländska utvandrarerna. Trots det har kvinnor fått liten uppmärksamhet i utvandringens historia och endast i begränsad utsträckning varit föremål för forskning. Artikeln bygger på idén att en grupp kvinnor, närmare bestämt ogifta kvinnor som utvandrade från Island, har "glömts bort" i sammanhanget. De tillhörde varken den isländska ämbetsmannakåren eller de lägsta samhällsskikten. De var till exempel inte pigor – eller i så fall endast under en kort period av sina liv. De var inte pionjärer eller kända för speciella insatser. De kan likväl studeras utifrån sina aktörskap. Vi menar att det är viktigt att förstå vari deras särställning bestod. I artikeln illustreras denna problematik genom några enskilda kvinnors livsöden. Artikeln utgår från Pierre Bourdieus kapitalbegrepp och kvinnorna analyseras utifrån sina sociala, kulturella och symboliska kapital. Vi menar att de hade resurser i någon bemärkelse, exempelvis utbildning, yrkeskarriär, släktrationer eller familj som de kunde utnyttja i det nya landet. Med utgångspunkt i det teoretiska perspektivet transnationalitet belyser vi kvinnornas liv, gränsöverskridande relationer och sociala nätverk. I nordisk forskning har man utnyttjat olika källor som brev, memoarer, livsberättelser och demografisk data av olika slag för att studera kvinnliga erfarenheter. Artikeln bygger på en typ av källor som tidigare varit underutnyttjad inom kvinno- och genushistoria, nämligen nekrologer och korta biografier. Slutligen använder vi material som bevarats av anhöriga och ättlingar till de berörda kvinnorna, främst berättelser och personliga minnen.

Keywords: gender, emigration, agency, capital, "biographisation"

### Endnotes

- 1 The Nordic countries are Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. The numbers for Finland refer to the years 1866–1930, while the numbers for Iceland refer to the years 1870–1925 (Hans Norman & Harald Runblom, *Transatlantic Connections: Nordic Migration to the New World after 1800*, Oslo 1987, p. 291).

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- 2 Continuous emigration from Iceland started in 1870, while there is a tradition in Icelandic history of defining its 'end' as being the beginning of the First World War in 1914. Although there might very well be a need to revise this definition, such a step is beyond the scope of this project. See Helgi Skúli Kjartansson & Steinhór Heidarsson, *Framtíð bandan hafs: Vesturfarir frá Íslandi 1870–1914*, Reykjavík 2003, p. 30.
  - 3 Norman & Runblom 1987, p. 31.
  - 4 Kjartansson & Heidarsson 2003, p. 104.
  - 5 Norman & Rönbloom 1987, p. 86–8.
  - 6 Kjartansson & Heidarsson 2003, pp. 122–3; Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 years: The History of a Marginal Society*, Reykjavík 2000, p. 238 (all translations from the Icelandic are ours, unless otherwise stated). Ann-Sofie Ohlander, *Kärlek, Död och Frihet: Historiska uppsatser om människovärde och livsvillkor i Sverige*, Stockholm 1986, p. 110 notes that more women than men emigrated from Sweden in the period 1896–1900. It should also be noted that 'for significant periods of time women formed the majority of Irish migrants', so that in the period 1899–1910, for example, the ratio of women was 52 percent to 48 percent men, Lorna R. McLean & Marilyn Barber, 'In Search of Comfort and Independence: Irish Immigrant Domestic Servants Encounter the Courts, Jails, and Asylums in Nineteenth-Century Ontario', in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta & Frances Swyripa (eds.), Toronto 2004, p. 134; Janet A. Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland 1885–1920*, Kentucky 1989, p. 3.
  - 7 See Guillermina Jasso, 'Migration, Human Development and the Life Course', in *Handbook of the Life Course*, Jeylan T. Mortimer & Michael J. Shanahan (eds.), New York 2003, pp. 331, 335; Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity, and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1870–1924*, New York 1996, p. 9.
  - 8 Ohlander 1986, p. 112.
  - 9 Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871*, Toronto 2001, pp. 171–3.
  - 10 Friedman-Kasaba 1996, p. 9.
  - 11 On the division of the Icelandic nation into occupational and social layers, see, for example, Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801–1930*, Uppsala 1988, pp. 32–41; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 'Íslensk thjóðfélagstróun á 19. öld', in *Íslensk thjóðfélagstróun 1880–1990: Ritgerdir*, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson & Svanur Kristjánsson (eds.), Reykjavík 1993, pp. 19–27.
  - 12 Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*, London 1997; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, Mass., 1984.
  - 13 Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, 'Fólksfjölda- og byggdathróun 1880–1990', in Hálfðanarson & Kristjánsson 1993, pp. 74, 83.
  - 14 Hálfðanarson 1993, pp. 20–7.
  - 15 Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, 'Sársaukans land. Vesturheimsferdir og íslensk hugsun', in *Burt og meir en bjarleid: Dagbækur og persónuleg skrif Vesturheimsfara á síðari hluta 19. aldar*, compiled by Davíð Ólafsson & Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, Reykjavík 2001, p.

- 32; Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 years: The History of a Marginal Society*, Reykjavík 2000, p. 233.
- 16 Karlsson 2000, pp. 236–7.
- 17 Kjartansson & Heidarsson 2003, p. 97.
- 18 Sune Åkerman, 'Amerikaprojektet och andra försök till samarbete inom humanistisk forskning: En personligt hållen återblick', in *Hembygden & Världen: Festskrift till Ulf Beijbom*, Lars Olsson & Sune Åkerman (eds.), Växjö 2002, p. 92; Birgitta Odén, 'På Ingrid Semmingsens axlar', in *Hembygden & Världen: Festskrift till Ulf Beijbom*, Lars Olsson & Sune Åkerman (eds.), Växjö 2002, p. 46; Magnússon 2001, p. 16.
- 19 Júníus H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870–1914: A Record of Emigrants from Iceland 1870–1914*, Reykjavík 1983.
- 20 Kristinsson 1983.
- 21 Kjartansson & Heidarsson 2003, p. 11; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, 'Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874–1893', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 1980:1, pp. 53–71; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Introduction', in *Vesturfaraskrá 1870–1914: A Record of Emigrants from Iceland 1870–1914*, Júníus H. Kristinsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1983, p. xvi.
- 22 Odd S. Lovoll, 'Norwegian Immigration and Women', in *Norwegian American Women, Migration, Communities, and Identities*, Betty A. Bergland & Lori Ann Lahlum (eds.), Minnesota 2011, pp. 60–3; Sune Åkerman, 'Aspects of migration as behavior and phenomenon: Reflections from the high tide of Nordic migration research', in *Nordic Migration: Research Status, Perspectives and Challenges*, Christina Folke Ax & Nils Olav Østrem (eds.), Tromsø 2011, p. 16.
- 23 Perry 2001, p. 171; Magnússon 2001, pp. 65–6; see also Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the US, 1820–1990*, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1994, pp. 47–8.
- 24 Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, 'Ánægja með það sem er-id gamla, er andlegur daudi': Af hugmyndum og félagsskap íslenskra róttæklinga í Manitoba vid upphaf 20. aldar', *Saga* 2012:2, pp. 36–8.
- 25 Lars Olsson, 'Evalina Johansdotter, Textile Workers, and the Munsingwear Family: Gender and Ethnicity in the Political Economy of Minnesota at the End of World War I', in *Swedes in the Twin Cities: Immigrant life and Minnesota's Urban Frontier*, Philip J. Anderson & Dag Blanck (eds.), Minnesota 2001, p. 79.
- 26 Olsson 2001, p. 79; Friedman-Kasaba 1996, p. 15.
- 27 Laurie Kristine Bertram, 'Fight like Audur: Gender, ethnicity and dissent in the career of Salome Halldorson – Manitoba Social Credit MLA, 1936–1941', *The Icelandic Canadian* 2009: 3, pp. 121–2.
- 28 Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, 'Multiple identities? Ethnic identity formation among Norwegian immigrants in the USA 1850–1900', in Folke Ax & Østrem 2011, p. 86.
- 29 Ohlander 1986. For a detailed discussion of the numbers on, for example, age and marital status, see pp. 108–12. See also Ann-Sofie Kälveborn (later Ohlander), 'Utvandring och självständighet: Några synpunkter på den kvinnliga emigrationen från Sverige', *Historisk tidskrift* (Swedish) 1983: 1, pp. 140–74.
- 30 Lovoll 2011, pp. 65–6; Norman & Runblom 1987, pp. 266–7; Ohlander 1986, pp. 111–12.
- 31 Lovoll 2011, pp. 65–6; Norman & Runblom 1987, pp. 266–7; Ohlander 1986, pp. 111–12, 117–18; Ólöf Gardarsdóttir, 'Tengsl théttbylismyndunar og Vesturheimsferða frá Íslandi: Lýðfræðileg sérkenni fólksflutninga frá Seydisfirði 1870–1910', *Saga* 1998, p. 158.
- 32 See Gardarsdóttir 1998, pp. 158, 176–9, Table 4.
- 33 Joy K. Lintelman, "On my own": single, Swedish and female in turn-of-the-century

- Chicago', in *Swedish-American life in Chicago: Cultural and Urban Aspects of an Immigrant People, 1850–1930*, Philip J. Anderson & Dag Blanck (eds.), Uppsala 1991, p. 91; Joy K. Lintelman, 'Between the mundane and the memorable: The letters of single and married Swedish immigrant women', *Swedish American Historical Quarterly* 2005:2–3, p. 170.
- 34 Joy K. Lintelman, *I go to America: Swedish American Women and the Life of Mina Anderson*, Minnesota 2009, pp. 4–9.
- 35 Lintelman 2009, pp. 4–5, 9.
- 36 Olsson 2001, pp. 77–9. These conclusions agree with Lisa Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s–1930*, Toronto 2007, p. 115, who remarks that historians of 'single women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have noted the prevalence of independent spirits in their subjects'.
- 37 Ulf Beijbom, *Utvandrarkvinnor: Svenska kvinnoöden i Amerika*, Stockholm 2006, p. 229.
- 38 Eva St Jean, 'Swedes on the Move. Politics, Culture, and Work among Swedish Immigrants in British Columbia, 1900–1950', Ph.D. diss., University of Victoria 2004, p. 115. St Jean also found that in 1931, 76 per cent of 'gainfully occupied' Scandinavian women in British Columbia, some 1,332 women altogether, were employed in 'service'. On the proportion of Scandinavians and Finns among domestic workers in Canada, see Varpu Lindström-Best, "'I Won't Be a Slave!'" Finnish Domesticity in Canada, 1911–30', in *I Won't Be a Slave! Selected Articles on Finnish Canadian Women's History*, Beaverton Ontario 2010, pp. 36–7.
- 39 Lars Ljungmark, *Svenskarna i Winnipeg: Porten til prärien 1872–1940*, Växjö 1994, p. 29, 31.
- 40 Lori Ann Lahlum, 'Women, Work, and Community in Rural Norwegian America, 1840–1920', in Bergland & Lahlum 2011, p. 84.
- 41 Perry 2001, p. 168.
- 42 Lahlum 2011, p. 93; Perry 2001, p. 168; Lovoll 2011, pp. 57–8; C. Lesley Biggs with Stella Stephanson, 'In Search of Gudrun Goodman: Reflections on Gender, 'Doing History' and Memory', *Canadian Historical Review* 2006:87(2), pp. 293–316.
- 43 These questions will be addressed in forthcoming articles. We intend to conduct a detailed analysis of single emigrant women from two districts in Iceland, namely Nordur-Múlasýsla in East Iceland and Skagafjardarsýsla in North Iceland, looking at the life stories of about 20 women in detail. In a second article, we will use Canadian censuses to establish in greater detail the 'structural social status' of these women.
- 44 See, for example, Ólafsson & Magnússon 2001; *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga*, i, Bödvar Gudmundsson (ed.), Reykjavík 2001; *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga*, ii, Bödvar Gudmundsson (ed.), Reykjavík 2002.
- 45 Examples can be seen in Salóme Fridbjarnardóttir Baldvinsson, Sigurbjörg Fridbjarnardóttir Björnsson, Sigríður Danielsdóttir Haralz, Hólmfríður Jósefsdóttir Kristjánsson and Sigríður Sigurdardóttir White. See *Vestur-íslenzkar æviskrár*, i, Benjamín Kristjánsson (ed.), Akureyri 1961, pp. 30–1, 73–4, 163–4, 224–5, 348.
- 46 See Margrét Gudmundsdóttir, 'Landnám kvennasögunnar á Íslandi', *Saga* 2000, pp. 36–8.
- 47 A search of newspaper obituaries published in *Lögberg* in one year (1945) reveals none of women who worked as domestic servants all their lives; there is, however, one for a widow who worked as a housekeeper in the same home for 20 years (*Lögberg* 22 March 1945, p. 7).
- 48 *Vestur-íslenzkar æviskrár* 1961, p. 49.
- 49 Betty A. Bergland, 'Introduction', in Bergland & Lahlum 2011, pp. 11–12.
- 50 Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988, p. 42; Perry 2001, p. 4.
- 51 Lena Marander-Eklund & Ann-Catrin Östman, 'Biografiska betydelse – norm och

- erfarenhet i levnadsberättelser', in *Biografiska betydelse. Norm och erfarenhet i levnadsberättelser*, Lena Marander-Eklund & Ann-Catrin Östman (eds.), Norra Västmanland 2011, p. 7.
- 52 Marander-Eklund & Östman 2011, p. 7.
- 53 Marander-Eklund & Östman 2011, p. 8.
- 54 C. Lesley Biggs with Stella Stephanson, 'In Search of Gudrun Goodman: Reflections on Gender, 'Doing History' and Memory', *Canadian Historical Review* 2006:87 (2), pp. 305–306.
- 55 Themes such as these are discussed in the Canadian historian C. Lesley Biggs's work on the Icelandic Canadian midwife Gudrun Goodman (see C. Lesley Biggs with Stella Stephanson 2006, p. 298).
- 56 See Marander-Eklund & Östman 2011, p. 13; Anna Johansson, *Narrativ teori och metod. Med livsberättelsen i fokus*, Lund 2005, pp. 21, 213.
- 57 Birgitta Svensson, 'Det moderna varat som biografisk presentation', in Marander-Eklund & Östman 2011, p. 26, 35.
- 58 Britt Liljewall, *Äck om du vore här'. 1800-talets folkliga brevkultur*, Stockholm 2007, p. 15.
- 59 Ohlander 1986, pp. 147, 135–6.
- 60 Hálfðanarson 1993, p. 18.
- 61 Gunnlaugsson 1988, p. 35.
- 62 Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 'Defining the Modern Citizen. Debates on Civil and Political Elements of Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century Iceland', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 1999:24(1), pp. 111–112.
- 63 Gunnlaugsson 1988, p. 109.
- 64 Jónsson 1981, pp. 10–12, 48.
- 65 Kjartansson & Heidarsson 2003, p. 58.
- 66 See, for example, Olsson 2001, pp. 77–89; Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta & Frances Swyripa, 'Introduction', in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, (eds.), Toronto 2004, p. 12. Jimmy Engren, 'Ahr ju in nihd öv ä sörvängtörl: Svenska hembiträden i de amerikanska källorna', in *Samhällshistoria i fokus: En festskrift till Lars Olsson om arbete, migration och kultur*, Lars Berggren, Mats Greiff, Jesper Johansson, Johan Svanberg & Malin Thor (eds.), Malmö 2010, p. 318, 324–6 claims that Swedish maids, willingly or not, were 'closed in a sector of the labour market' that women of American origin 'were not eager to enter'.
- 67 Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir, *Bryddingar: Um samfélagid sem mannanna verk*. Reykjavík 2000, pp. 28–9; see also Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir, *Läkaryrket i förändring: En studie av den medicinska professionens heterogenisering och könsdifferentiering*, Gothenburg 1997.
- 68 Skeggs 1997, 2004. For the relationship between Bourdieu's concept of capital and social network research, see Íris Ellenberger, *Danskir innflytjendur á Íslandi 1900–1970: Félagsleg stada, samþætting og þverthjódleiki*, Reykjavík 2013, pp. 33–4. This is a theme that bears greater study.
- 69 Skeggs 1997, p. 8.
- 70 For family ties, see Skeggs 1997, p. 8; for personal contacts, see Ylva Ulfsdóttir Eriksson, *Yrke, Status & Genus. En sociologisk studie om yrken på en segregerad arbetsmarknad*, Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, Gothenburg University 2006, pp. 49–50.
- 71 See Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldid í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga*, Reykjavík 2004; Torfi Tulinius, 'Pierre Bourdieu and Snorri Sturluson: Chieftains, sociology and the development of literature in medieval Iceland?', in *Snorres Edda – i europeisk og islandsk kultur*, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (ed.), Reykholt 2009, pp. 47–71; Ellenberger 2013, p. 33–4.
- 72 Diane Reay, 'Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class', in *Feminism after Bourdieu*, Lisa Adkins & Beverley Skeggs (eds.), Oxford

- 2004, pp. 58–9. See also Daisy L. Neijmann, *The Icelandic voice in Canadian Letters: The Contribution of Icelandic–Canadian writers to Canadian literature*, in: *Nordic Voices*, Ottawa 1997, p. 78, 90; Vidar Hreinsson, ‘Vestur-íslenskar bókmenntir’, in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, iii, Halldór Guðmundsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1996, p. 730.
- 73 Skeggs 1997, p. 8.
- 74 Tulinius 2009, p. 52.
- 75 Tulinius 2004, p. 134.
- 76 Tulinius 2009, p. 49.
- 77 Chilton 2007, pp. 6–7.
- 78 Ólafur Arnar Sveinsson, ‘Sjálfsmyndir og sendibréf íslenskra vesturfara’, in *Sögubíng Sagfræðistofnunar 2012: Ráðstefnurit*, Reykjavík 2013, p. 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/15604>. See also Ólafur Arnar Sveinsson, ‘Rifillinn er hinn besti vinur hermansins’: Átök um sjálfsmyndir íslensks vesturfara’, *Ritid* 2014:1, pp. 59–81. For an interesting discussion of such an experience, see Sigfríður Gunnlaugsdóttir, ‘Thótt greini oss mál, oss sameinar sál’: Cultural hybridity in the Poetry of Guttormur J. Guttormsson’, in *Rediscovering Canadian difference*, Gudrun Björk Guðsteins (ed.), Reykjavík 2001, p. 68–9.
- 79 Royden Loewen & Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada*, Toronto 2009, p. 41.
- 80 For Icelandic nationalism in the early twentieth century, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, ‘The Renovation of Native Pasts: A Comparison between Aspects of Icelandic and Czech Nationalist Ideology’, *Slavonic and East European Review* 2000:78(4), pp. 1–22.
- 81 See Laurie K. Bertram, ‘New Icelandic Ethnoscapes: Material, visual, and oral terrains of cultural expression in Icelandic Canadian history, 1875–present’, Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto 2010, pp. xi, 87. However, as Bertram notes (pp. xxix, 14), recent research stresses the ‘the continual construction of Icelandic identity in relations to conditions, and particularly the pressures of Anglo-conformity and multicultural nationalism in Canada’. See also Neijmann 1997, p. 78, 90.
- 82 See Sigríður Matthíasdóttir & Ann-Catrin Östman, ‘Möte mellan manligheter. Nationalism, bondeideal och (åter)skapandet av de övre skiktens manlighetsideal’, in *Könsmaktens förvandlingar. En vänbok till Anita Göransson*, Gothenburgh 2003, pp. 91–4; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, ‘Nationalisme, køn og kvindesag i Island ved århundredeskiftet 1900’, in *Den dubbla blicken. Historia i de nordiska sambällena kring sekelskiftet 1900*, Harald Gustafsson, Fredrik Persson, Charlotte Thornbjør & Anna Wallethe (eds.), Lund 2007, pp. 119–24.
- 83 Epp, Iacovetta & Swyripa 2004, p. 11.
- 84 See Tulinius 2004, p. 144.
- 85 See Hallgrímur Pétursson and Guðrídur Símonardóttir, *Nidjatal*, ii, Ari Gíslason (ed.), Reykjavík 1989, p. 305.
- 86 Lögberg 30 May 1946 p. 7. Guðný Thorvaldsdóttir’s life story is interesting, for example, because her work was basically within ‘service’. However, she seems to have managed to carve out a track within that trade that gave her social status within the community.
- 87 *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* 1961, p. 153.
- 88 *Heimskringla* 4 February 1953, p. 1. Another example of an emigrant seamstress is Þórunn Rósa Magnúsdóttir Jóhannsson (see *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* 1961, p. 190).
- 89 The sources do not agree on the year of Guðrídur Gísladóttir’s birth. According to *Althingismannatal 1845–1995*, Reykjavík 1996, p. 154 she was born in 1839; according to the obituary in *Lögberg* 14 August, 1919, p. 1, however, it was 1837. In the census of 1845, she was given as being 7 years of age (<http://www.manntal.is/?lang=en>, s.v. ‘1845, Guðrídur Gísladóttir, 7’).
- 90 See *Lögberg* 14 August 1919, p. 1; *Althingismannatal 1845–1995*, Reykjavík 1996, p. 154.

- 91 *Lögberg* 14 August 1919, p. 1.
- 92 Arnljótur Ólafsson from Bægisá is a rather well-known figure in Icelandic history. See, for example, Gylfi Th. Gíslason, 'Séra Arnljótur Ólafsson: 150 ára minning', *Fjármálatíðindi* 1974:Jan.–July, pp. 17–28.
- 93 Jón J. Bildfell, 'Kristrún Sveinungadóttir', *Almanak Ólafs S. Thorgeirssonar* 1943, pp. 45–6.
- 94 Bildfell 1943, pp. 44–51.
- 95 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 96 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 97 See *Bjarki* 19 January 1903 pp. 1–2.
- 98 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 99 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 100 In Iceland, it was in 1900 that married women were made the legal owners of the money they earned and could inherit property (Ártöl og áfangar í sögu íslenskra kvenna, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir & Guðrún Dís Jónatansdóttir (eds.), Reykjavík 1998, p. 147).
- 101 Lahlum 2011, p. 93.
- 102 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7. See also Hérads-skjalasafn Austfirðinga, Sey-110-1, Gjördabók fyrir Seydisfjardarkaupstad (bæjarstjórn), 2 January 1895–24 June 1908, pp. 108–109.
- 103 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 104 *Lögberg* 28 January 1909, p. 7.
- 105 *Lögberg* 17 November 1904, p. 8.
- 106 Jóhanna Ketilsdóttir is not a common name. However, according to the *Record of Emigrants*, there were two women with this name who emigrated. The other one left Iceland as a 1-year-old child with her parents in 1887 and would thus have been 20 in 1904 (see Kristinsson 1983, p. 105).
- 107 See Anna Sigurdardóttir, *Vinna kvenna á Íslandi í 1100 ár: Reykjavík* 1985, pp. 308–311.
- 108 *Lögberg* 18 October 1951, p. 4.
- 109 *Lögberg* 18 October 1951, p. 4.
- 110 *Lögberg* 18 October 1951, p. 4. She was skilled in versifying according to the traditionally accepted rules of Icelandic popular poetry. Such poetry is today still commonly improvised in Iceland and has long been a familiar part of everyday life.
- 111 *Lögberg* 6 June 1946, p. 5.
- 112 Hérads-skjalasafn Skagfirðinga. KB, 228 4to, Bréfasafn Önnu og Lárusar Nordal, Gimli. Letter from Anna Sigbjörnsson, 18 December 1946.
- 113 Walter J. Lindal, *The Saskatchewan Icelanders: A Strand of the Canadian Fabric*, Winnipeg 1955, pp. 142–144. The others mentioned were W. H. Paulson, Dr Sig. Jul. Johannesson and the Rev. Runolfur Fjeldsted. For Rannveig K. G. Sigbjörnsson, see Neijmann 1997, p. 223.
- 114 See *Haukur Stefánsson 1901–1953*, Akureyri 1995; Haukur Ágústsson, *Ferill til frama: Ævisaga Björgvins Guðmundssonar tónskálds*, Akureyri 2011.
- 115 *Lögberg* 23 September 1926, p. 5.
- 116 *Ljósmaður* á Íslandi, i, Björg Einarsdóttir & Valgerdur Kristjónsdóttir (eds.), Reykjavík 1984, p. 303.
- 117 *Lögberg* 23 September 1926, p. 5; *Ljósmaður* á Íslandi, i. p. 303.
- 118 *Lögberg* 23 September 1926, p. 5.
- 119 *Heimskringla* 28 April 1926, p. 8.
- 120 *Lögberg* 23 September 1926, p. 5.