

**Q: Do you think it is any easier to be a woman today than when you were young?**

**A: "All in all believe it is great to be a woman today, with more room for action than before."**

## A pioneer of women's history studies

The Alumni Interview: Ida Blom

*As a historian, she studied women's liberation. As a woman, she experienced this liberation. For Professor Ida Blom, history and life are two sides of the same coin.* **TEXT** CHARLOTTE MYRBRÅTEN **PHOTO** EIVIND SENNESET

**1952.** When Ida Blom moved to Paris, she was unaware that French women didn't have the right to vote until 1944. Or that Belgian women needed written permission from their husbands to work outside the home. It took Blom another 20 years to make these discoveries.

"I was utterly astonished. Prior to this, I hadn't even considered that women's suffrage was something new. It was a true shock," says Ida Blom when we meet her at home in Bergen.

But it was coincidence that made Ida Blom engage in women's history studies.

"As a young woman, when I was making up my mind as to what to study, I first considered medicine.

But it was a long and expensive study and student loans didn't exist at the time," she explains.

Instead she trained for two years to become a secretary, an education that would take her to Switzerland and France. A passion for language led to French and German studies, before the subject of history drew her in.

"When time came for me to graduate, the issue of Greenland seemed pertinent. Seeing that I am a Danish woman settled in Norway, the conflict over Greenland was interesting. Later, this became the subject of my PhD."

Blom defended her doctoral thesis in May 1972. After years of intense study, she finally had time to engage

with the fast-moving world events outside of academia.

**1972.** Resistance against the European Community was a wake-up call for Blom, as it was for many politically active people at the time. In particular she was concerned about what at the time was known as the Common Market.

**"I became aware that the Common Market leadership consisted only of men. There were no women at all!"**

During this time she met several women who pointed to the unequal power balance between men and women. This strongly influenced the



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A LIFE OF WOMEN'S HISTORY RESEARCH: Professor emerita Ida Blom has had major influence on the rise of women's history research in Norway, Scandinavia and internationally. In 2008, one of the buildings at the University of Bergen was named after her – Ida Blom's Building.

direction of Blom's research.

"It had never occurred to me that women before me hadn't had the right to vote! As a historian this was quite surprising. This made me ask questions. What issues have been important to women? So I started researching women's history."

Blom threw herself head over heels into women's history studies.

**The study of history thus far had been dominated by political history. That meant men and power. Women were almost invisible. Blom wanted to change that.** She wanted women to become a visible part of the study of history.

"Opening my eyes to women's history, about which we knew little back

then, the first thing that grabbed my attention was the history of everyday struggle. I was clearly inspired by the changes in historical research, with less emphasis on the political parties, governments, and international relations. Concepts such as everyday life history made their way into academia and historical demography became more important."

A key element was the right for women to control their own bodies. This work took up a lot of Blom's time as a researcher in the 1970s.

"I decided to investigate what I thought of as a crucial element in women's history, namely for women to control their own bodies and to decide how many children they wanted

to bear," Blom says. "This led to my first book in this field, on birth control, where contraception and abortion were essential. In another book, I discussed what help women would get when giving birth."

These issues led to a general interest in the subject of health history, and Blom also went on to write about both tuberculosis and legislation on venereal disease.

As Blom's work progressed, issues such as the definition of labour and women's participation in the workplace also became natural areas of research for her. She noticed that women's unpaid work in the home had not been considered work. So she paid this issue special attention. ▶

► “I was interested in the concept of work and how work was connected with employment. Thus, all of women’s work in the home was left out. This problem was particularly acute in rural societies. The concept of work simply had to be redefined to include women’s contributions to society,” she says.

Gradually, a change of paradigms in the humanities as well as in the social sciences reflected a change in attitudes and the focus of a new generation of researchers began to emerge.

**1985.** The University of Bergen (UiB) opened Europe’s first centre of women’s studies in the humanities. Ida Blom became its first chair. In the same year she was appointed as the first women’s history studies professor in Norway. These changes in academia were an international phenomenon and Blom established contacts across borders. Her own work was a reflection of this hectic activity.

“It was important for me to view Norwegian history – including women’s history and gender theory – in relation to other countries’ history. Amongst other things, this led to my work as an editor of a women’s world history,” she says of a book series published by the Norwegian publisher Cappelen.

Did she ever feel any discrimination herself in the world of academia? “There were only a few woman historians at universities back then. I was the only female member in the department of history at UiB. Might I have been considered a buttonhole flower? However, when I started focusing on women’s history, there was some resistance on a professional level,” she admits before adding. “We did have passionate discussions. But that is definitely not unusual in a research environment.”

**2013.** Norway is celebrating the centennial anniversary of Norwegian women’s right to vote – or *Stemmerettsjubileet*, as it is known in

Norwegian. Ida Blom may be retired, but is still active as a speaker. She finds it excellent that the focus on women’s voting rights is associated with the Norwegian Constitution’s bicentenary celebrations in 2014.

“Both these jubilees deal with democratisation. It is wonderful to see the great interest in this year’s events. One can hardly open a newspaper without reading about women’s right to vote,” she says smiling.

Both as a feminist and as a historian Ida Blom notices distinct changes in the women’s rights struggle. She sometimes finds it hard to spot what women activists are focusing on today.

“In the 1970s it was all rather concrete. There was the work to get more women elected in parliament and local councils. We’ve made great progress here, but there is still some way to go,” she stresses before bringing up the more intimate concerns of many women. “The issue of birth control was important for us back then. I remember a doctor in Bergen who advised on contraception. Her

work created commotion and debate. It was all very concrete, yes.”

But she also believes that many issues are the same now as in the 1970s. Issues related to sexuality and the right to choose are still key for the women’s rights struggle.

“There is a lot of talk about sexuality. **Of course women must be able to dance and enjoy themselves. Yet it is also essential that women come across as intellectual and political beings.** Our minds and commitments should be the focus,” she says. “Maybe this is a little absent in feminism now. Liberation by undressing is not the right way forward for women.”

According to Blom, domestic life is one of the most important arenas for modern feminism.

“In my generation it was unheard of for the father to be on paternity leave. Now both parents share the responsibility of staying at home with small children. This is a new and interesting development. I sympathise greatly with the idea that fathers should spend more time with their young children,” says Blom.

Do you believe it is easier to be a woman now than when you were younger?

“Well, it has become much easier to engage in activities outside of the home and family. At the same time, people are often hard up for time. People expect far more from life. And people do consume more,” she says before striking a more conciliatory note. “But there are more ways to organise your daily life now than before. All in all I believe it is great to be a woman today, with more room for action than before.”

Ida Blom walks the way she talks. Gender equality has been as natural a part of her everyday life as of her academic career.

“Our kids grew up in a home where mum and dad were not just wife and husband, but friends. Enjoying life together. Several of my children’s friends thought it was great that I was working outside the home, unlike their own mothers. I believe that my husband and I have shown that things can be done differently.” ◉

#### FACTS

##### Ida Clara Blom

- Professor emerita of history.
- Born 20 February 1931 in Gentoft, Denmark.
- Defended her doctoral thesis *The fight for Eirik Raude’s country (Kampen om Eirik Raudes land)* at UiB in 1972.
- In 1985, appointed as the first professor of women’s history in Norway and became head of UiB’s Centre of Women’s Studies in the humanities.
- Co-founder and first President of the International Federation for Research in Women’s History (IFRWH) 1987–95.
- Won the book award Brageprisen in 1992 for *Cappelens kvinnehistorie I-III*, a women’s world history collection.
- Honorary doctorate at University of Copenhagen in 1996.
- Honorary president of the International Federation for Research in Women’s History (IFRWH) in 1999.
- Appointed Commander of the Order of St. Olav in 2001.
- Appointed honorary member of the American Historical Association in 2006.
- Recipient of the Gina Krog Prize for 2009, awarded by the Norwegian Association for Women’s Rights (Norsk Kvinnesaksforening).
- Has worked to integrate women’s and gender history in teaching at all educational levels as part of the subject of history.

## What others say about Ida Blom...

**“Ida Blom has been a pioneer in the understanding of birth control, women’s suffrage struggle and sexual citizen issues, where she has engaged in everything from the treatment of so-called ‘tyskertøs’, women who had amorous relations with German soldiers during WW2, to the welfare state’s treatment of STDs.”**

Hilde Danielsen, writer and researcher, UiB

**“Ida Blom is a pioneer in both women’s and gender research and in historical research. She has always been internationally oriented. In 2006 she was appointed an honorary member of the American Historical Association, a prestigious award achieved by few foreign researchers. She is a role model for all women scientists, not only at UiB, but throughout Norway and the world.”**

Ellen Mortensen, professor and academic director, Centre for Women’s and Gender Research (SKOK), UiB