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# WOMAN SUFFRAGE IN FINLAND.

— BY —



**MADAME AINO MALMBERG.**

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# VOTES FOR WOMEN.

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## Women's Freedom League.

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**NAME.**—The Women's Freedom League.

**OBJECTS.**—To secure for Women the Parliamentary Vote as it is or may be granted to men; to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between the sexes, and to promote the social and industrial well-being of the community.

**METHODS.**—The objects of the League shall be promoted by—

1. Action entirely independent of all political parties.
2. Opposition to whatever Government is in power until such time as the franchise is granted.
3. Participation in Parliamentary Elections; at By-elections in opposition to the Government candidate and independently of all other candidates.
4. Vigorous agitation upon lines justified by the position of outlawry to which women are at present condemned.
5. The organizing of women all over the country to enable them to give adequate expression to their desire for political freedom.
6. Education of public opinion by all the usual methods, such as public meetings, demonstrations, debates, distribution of literature, newspaper correspondence, and deputations to public representatives and other bodies and their members.

**MEMBERSHIP.**—Women of all shades of political opinion who approve the objects and methods of the League, and who are prepared to act independently of party, are eligible for membership. All members must approve, though they need not actually participate in, militant action.

## Woman Suffrage in Finland.

BY MADAME AINO MALMBERG.

It is a usual misapprehension abroad that the granting of full political rights to the women of Finland was only one of the typical quickly vanishing phenomena of the revolution of 1905, not a result of previous work and of a deeply felt claim for justice. The opponents of Woman's Suffrage outside Finland have also predicted the most terrible consequences to our poor country from this foolish experiment, and they seem to find but little consolation in their belief in the ultimate failure of such sudden revolutionary whims.

It is true that the events of 1905 were "sudden and revolutionary," just like the outburst of a sweeping thunderstorm, but they were also as natural and unavoidable as thunder and lightning when the air is saturated with electricity, because they were the logical outcome of incessant work and much suffering.

The most important political change for the Finnish nation, brought into effect, but not created by the revolution, was the proclaiming of general adult suffrage on July 20th, 1906. The sex disability was abolished, and the women of Finland have now the same rights as the men to vote and to be elected into the Finnish Diet.

However, before I can give a more detailed account of the present position of the Finnish women, I must say a few words about the work done before the revolution.

The systematic work for the rights of women began in Finland in 1887, when the Finnish Women's Association (Finsk Koinno-förening) was established. In 1892 another association, The Union, was founded, working for the same end, but with a slightly different programme. Men, as well as women, could be members of the Union.

Before such associations were possible, there had naturally been in Finland, as in other countries, many warm-hearted pioneers, who had given their work and their heart's love to the

great idea without ever having the joy of witnessing the victory that was to follow the struggle. They dug the ground and laid the foundation upon which the building of freedom was to stand.

In this short pamphlet, however, I must concentrate, and only speak about the time when the work was systematically carried on.

When trying to characterize the period between 1887 and the revolution of 1905, I find it suitable to divide it into two epochs, the first running from 1887 to 1899 and the second from the said year to 1905.

Up to 1899 the Finnish nation was divided into two political parties—the Fennowans and the Ivecomans—who were engaged in a fierce struggle as to which of the two native languages, Finnish and Swedish, should be supreme. The language question had gained such dimensions that there were hardly any departments of social or political life that it had not invaded, with the result that it strangled nearly all other interests. How thoroughly the language hatred had poisoned our blood is clearer than ever now when we have had some years of rest after the terrible times of Russian tyranny. During those unhappy years we really forgot that we had two languages, and there was only one Finnish nation fighting for its life. But no sooner had the political sky begun to clear up than we were trying our best to revive the old hatred again.

Before 1899 the woman's question—and to some extent also the temperance question—were almost the only important expressions of intellectual life that had power enough to unite members of the different political parties to co-operation for the same purpose.

Both the Finnish Women's Association and the Union had put a definite demand for Women's Franchise on their programmes, but during that earliest period the question of franchise did not come into the foreground. The chief reason, I believe, was to be found in the lack of real political interest outside the everlasting language question.

It is true that Women's Franchise had been discussed in the press now and then—for the first time as early as 1873, and in 1887 two governors of Finnish provinces raised the question again, but it had no power to attract attention outside rather a small circle. In 1897 a resolution demanding votes for women was introduced in the Diet, but there was no hope of passing it. The municipal vote in the country districts had been given to women as early as 1863, and in towns in 1872; but it seemed to have no effect whatever upon the question of political votes.

In 1889 the first pamphlet dealing with Woman's Suffrage was published in Finland by a well-known champion of women's rights, but even she did not think it advisable to extend the

demand for citizenship so far as to claim the right for women to be elected into the Diet.

Though the direct work for Women's Suffrage was rather insignificant at that time, much was done indirectly by incessant labour for the improvement of the social position of women which was to create a public opinion in favour of equal rights for both sexes.

The most important part of that work was the improvement of the education of girls. In the middle of the eighties, the first co-educational schools were established, and their effect upon the women's question can hardly be overrated. The opponents of the women's emancipation seemed to understand by instinct what a strong weapon such schools may prove to be in woman's struggle for freedom, and the old arguments against any progress towards liberty, predictions of a ruined family life, a deep degradation of the women, a total destruction of the moral order of the world, &c., were heard in different variations from all the dark corners of Finnish social life, but they could not extinguish the fire of enthusiasm which the champions of co-education had kindled.

The co-educational schools became popular, and even those who formerly opposed them fiercely, now send their children to them.

The fact that boys and girls came to know each other in serious work where they had an opportunity both of competing and of collaborating, abolished in a practical and natural way the feelings of supremacy and of subjection which, in spite of all good theories, had been long prevailing even among quite youthful members of both sexes.

At the University of Helsingfors, where the number of women students has been ever increasing, the same sense of equality and good comradeship soon gained ground, and as a fact to be proud of, I may mention that there has never existed in Finland that hostile feeling between students of different sexes which has been a disgraceful feature in the University life of many countries.

Girls receiving the same amount of knowledge as boys they were quite naturally drawn to many occupations that had hitherto been shut to them, and they could now try their energy and develop their faculties in various branches of work. In Finland it was naturally easier than in the great countries of Europe, the nation still being young and without traditions which make all innovations so difficult among the old leading nations of the world. Besides Finland is a poor country, where everybody has to work. We cannot afford to have too many theories and prejudices.

Thus practical work and teaching went hand in hand all the time, influencing opinion in a subtle, invisible way.

So long as the woman's question was theoretical only, its opponents used to point out all sorts of practical impossibilities. These were now proved to be false, and at the same time the foolish fear of sex-war, which was often spoken of in the beginning of the campaign, was completely removed.

I have been deliberately dwelling upon the woman's question among the educated classes only, because there is not much to say about the movement among the working classes before the year 1899. The two women's associations had done a good deal of educating and awakening work among the peasant women, but the mighty Socialistic movement, which was to give a character of its own to the woman's question, was still in its cradle.

Then there came the terrible turning point in the national life of Finland in 1899, when the solemnly ratified rights of the country were violated by the Russian Government.

Like a bolt from the blue the mortal blow against the Finnish constitution fell upon the whole nation. It had at first an almost stupefying effect upon everybody, because it came so absolutely unexpectedly, and because there seemed no reason to justify it.

After recovering from the first shock the question arose quite naturally, what was to be done? There were two ways to choose—either to yield or to fight for our rights by all possible means. Of course, there were many dubious characters who understood at once that now their golden opportunity had come, and the worst elements of the nation quickly rose to the surface, but I am glad to say that for the great majority of the Finnish people there seemed to be no doubt which path to choose. They did not hesitate, though they knew only too well that it meant for so many of them economic ruin, prison, exile, and sufferings of many kinds.

And so they began those long years of struggle and endless woe, when the fight often seemed quite hopeless and the future grew darker day by day.

But at the same time it was a period of wonderful political awakening and hard training, and for the women of Finland it was the time when they could prove that their work for the country was just as important as that of their brothers.

In times of deadly peril you do not care very much about the profound wisdom that draws a sharp line between the fields of action of both sexes, telling us what sort of work men always ought to do, and what is suitable for women. Women, like men, had to do all they could in the fight against the common enemy, without having any time to think if they were ladylike or not. They worked hand in hand with the men, and very soon it became evident that men or women alone could do nothing, but both together formed a power that was unconquerable.

In the meantime, the political horizon grew darker day by day, and the constant violent attacks upon the most vital rights of Finland clearly showed that the existence of the Finnish people as a nation was threatened. Many there were who gave themselves up to despair, but others seemed to have their strength redoubled. At last the day came when passive endurance would have meant the same as a total abolition of all self-respect and sense of honour in the nation. The righteous wrath of the people had reached its climax and found expression in the deed of the young hero Eugene Schauman, the William Tell of Finland, who slew the oppressor of our country, the Russian Governor (General Bolorikoff) in June, 1904, and at the same time gave his own life as a sacrifice, for the sake of freedom.

After that the horizon began to clear a little. People could breathe again, but at the same time the want of political freedom was felt more and more keenly.

A presentiment of a coming change began to grow in a subtle way and people felt a desire to meet and to discuss the situation.

In the autumn of 1904 persons belonging to different parties sent an appeal to both the women's associations asking them to arrange a meeting for discussing what was to be done in order to gain votes for women. The Union was glad to meet the wishes of the petitioners, and a great meeting was arranged in November, 1904.

This meeting was an interesting event in the history of Woman Suffrage in Finland. It opened the eyes, or perhaps I had rather say the hearts, of many, and made everybody understand that the claim of full citizenship for women was not any longer an interesting problem only, the pros and cons of which were to be discussed and analyzed; it was an inevitable demand. Two different currents of opinion were for the first time placed opposite each other. There were those who called for franchise for women on the same conditions men had had it up to the present time. The Socialists, however, who formed the great majority of the meeting argued that the whole system of franchise must be altered.

It must not be forgotten that the conditions of social and political life in Finland at that time were vastly different from those of any other European country. The abolition of sex disability was not in principle opposed by any political party as a whole, because the immense pressure from outside, and the constant danger in which we lived, had had a radicalizing effect even upon the most conservative elements. Besides, the women had really proved that their work was by no means of less importance for the welfare of Finland than the work of Finnish men. It seems to be always the case that a short time of hard experience can teach a good deal more than centuries of ease,

when people have time to build up most complicated theories on the simplest questions.

Perhaps there was another reason besides that made the men of Finland understand the claims of women better than before. During those times the men themselves had experienced what it meant to have only duties, but no real rights. The Russian Government had clearly shown that the rights and laws of Finland, be they ever so solemnly sworn and ratified, meant as good as nothing; arbitrariness was the only ruling principle. The Finnish men suffered deeply from it, and the hard lesson was not taught in vain.

The progress of the principle was triumphant indeed, but yet the question of woman's rights was only a beautiful theory, the realization of which lay somewhere in the unfathomable future. If anybody had told us that our most daring dreams were to come true in about a year, it would have sounded like sheer madness to most of us.

The Diet, consisting then of four estates, was to assemble the following year, 1905, and petitions on Woman's Franchise were to be handed in, but nobody expected any practical results.

Fate was, however, to alter the whole political aspect of Finland in a short time. On the last day of October, 1905, the so-called Great Strike broke out all over the country almost simultaneously with a strike in Russia.

What was then the Great Strike? It was revolution, bloodless revolution.

All work stopped on the same day all over Finland. Factories, schools, offices, telegraph, railways, private work—everything came to a standstill as if by the order of an invisible power. Without words, without explanations it was clear to everybody that we had now arrived at a turning point; we should either gain everything or lose everything. There was nothing between the two extremes.

People met in great masses, they wanted to interchange ideas, they wanted to see each other. It was impossible to be alone, because now, perhaps for the very first time, it became a living truth to everybody that we were all members of a great family, responsible for each other. There were no strangers, no enemies, no upper class, no lower class any more. We were brothers and sisters. Even the difference of age seemed to have disappeared. Children were seized by the same spirit as their parents. In Helsingfors, for instance, where a keenly hostile feeling had always prevailed between Russian and Finnish school children, the pupils of both nationalities were now seen walking together hand in hand, in long processions through the streets singing the Marseillaise, each in his own language, but each with the same all absorbing enthusiasm.

As one man the whole nation had risen claiming full human rights for each of its members.

Often I have heard the questions: Who led it? Who arranged it all? Nobody; it was the spirit of the people who led, who arranged, who gave the calm courage to meet death if needed.

Great meetings were held every day at Helsingfors, and representatives were sent to St. Petersburg to express the wishes of the Finnish nation to the Grand Duke of Finland. The principal claims were *restoring of law and general adult suffrage for men and women*.

Everything was granted in St. Petersburg, and an Imperial Proposition to that effect was laid before the assembled old Diet, which was ready to meet the wishes of the nation most loyally and unanimously.

Thus every Finnish man and woman twenty-four years of age received the right to elect and to be elected to the Diet, which consists of one chamber with 200 members. There are only the following exceptions who are not allowed to take part in the elections:—

1. Persons on active military service.
2. Those under guardianship.
3. Those who during the last three years have not been registered in Finland.
4. Those having, from other reasons than poverty, not paid the taxes for the last two years.
5. Those receiving personal support from the Parochial Relief Board, where this support is not merely an occasional one.
6. Those who have left their property for the benefit of their creditors until the respective estates have been sworn to.
7. Those who have been sentenced for vagrancy until the end of the third year after their release.
8. Those who in consequence of a court of law's sentence must be considered as having lost their bona fides, or have been forbidden employment in the Civil Service or to plead at the Bar.
9. Those who have been convicted of having at election for the Diet, bought or sold a vote or made endeavours in this respect, or by force or threats infringed electoral liberty; this restriction to be in force until the end of the sixth year after the court of law's sentence in the matter.

But before the law had been finally passed there was a time of about nine months (till the end of July, 1906), during which reaction already began to make its voice heard. Concerning the

citizenship of woman, it must, however, be admitted that the reaction was very weak. Here and there somebody tried to remind us of the trite phrases that women were not yet "ready to receive those rights" they ought to be "educated for their new responsibilities," &c. Some kind souls even told us that it was our duty to give up all claims of Suffrage because the welfare of our native country was in danger. Of what sort this mystical danger was we were never told.

Those voices were silenced so effectually that they lost for ever all desire to utter their opinions on that question.

In this connexion I cannot help mentioning with some pride that the very oldest arguments against the rights of women, those which were common in Finland some twenty years ago, and which I suppose do not sound quite unfamiliar even in Great Britain, were never uttered then. I mean the terrible prophecies that women would lose their womanly charm, "des Ewigweibliche" would disappear for ever, and women would become unsexed—and on the other hand the indisputable proof of woman's disability to use their votes, that they cannot become soldiers! The hard years under the Russian scourge had taught even the most stupid some truths which made him hesitate a little before using the old platitudes.

The first elections to the new Diet took place in the middle of March, 1907. The interest shown was unusually keen, and great masses of men and women were seen at the polls from early in the morning till late at night.

Nineteen women, belonging to different parties were elected.

The first Diet was dissolved in the spring, 1908, and new elections took place in July that same year. There were many who had predicted that the number of women would decrease now, on account of the great reaction in the political life, but the prophets were wrong. Instead of nineteen, twenty-five women were now sent to the Diet.

It was curious to see how those who had predicted that in consequence of Woman's Suffrage a certain political party would gain a majority, were absolutely mistaken. The Liberals, who had been afraid that women would strengthen the Conservative element were just as wrong as the Conservatives, who thought that Socialism would become dangerously strong because of Woman's Suffrage. It has caused no change whatever in the relative strength of each party, because the women voters, as well as the women members of the Diet, are divided among the different parties in same proportions as men.

But there are departments of social life where the consequences of Woman's Suffrage have already been felt, and where they certainly will be most important. All questions relating to the family, to the position of women and children, to general morals, &c., have aroused a keen interest among the women

without regard to parties. In the Diet most petitions handed in by women dealt with the above-named matters; for instance, women's right to Government appointments, the rights of illegitimate children, the raising of the age of consent and so on.

In the Diet the woman members have, like the men, been elected on to many committees, and proved to be good and conscientious workers. Their position—not only in the eyes of law, but in practice—is the same as that of their men colleagues, and Finland has never had to regret that Finnish women have gained full citizenship.

As political rights were finally given to the women through a sudden revolution, there are now many curious anomalies in the Finnish legislation. Thus, for instance, a woman who is eligible to the Diet cannot be a member of a town council, not to mention many other examples of the same character.

But these are all facts of less importance now that we have the machinery in our hands, and it only depends upon ourselves to alter what we consider wrong and absurd.

In general it must be admitted that the results of Woman Suffrage in Finland have been only good and beneficial, and there is no political party in Finland that would wish to diminish the rights once gained by the Finnish women.

Heavy clouds are again gathering on the political sky of our country. Day by day the reaction in Russia is growing stronger, and the thousands of gallows which the Russian Government has erected in that unhappy country do not seem to satisfy the bloodthirsty monster any longer. Its eyes are turned once more to Finland—and we understand what it means. Finland has had a rest of more than three years, and the hard times will begin again, perhaps more perilous than ever. But we shall meet them more calmly and much better prepared than in 1899, because the number of Finnish citizens is more than doubled now. Women are no longer in the position of children, but have the rights, the duties, and the responsibilities of full citizenship.

That will give strength in the coming struggle.

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