

Women's Fight for Civil, Social and Political Rights in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland

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The years 1918-1923 were significant for equality movements. During this short period, nineteen European countries granted women civil and political rights. In 1918, Austria, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary (where rights were nevertheless restricted until 1945), the United Kingdom and Ireland (restricted until 1928), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia offered political rights to women; in 1919, Belarus, Belgium (restricted until 1948) and the Netherlands followed; in 1920, so did Albania and Czechoslovakia; and in 1921, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Sweden did as well. Women citizens willingly exercised their passive and active electoral rights in the first national elections open to them, in which a significant number of women not only voted but also stood as candidates. The first women candidates were elected to take seats in national parliaments or were nominated to represent their states as ambassadors. Furthermore, international organisations fought to improve the situation and equality of women. For example, the United Nations secured social rights for women workers, including maternity protection. Unfortunately, this does not mean that all rights were fully implemented: few women were actually elected or nominated for official state positions.

Several different galvanising forces had driven this shift towards equal rights. The general impetus for democratisation and the popularisation of Liberalism¹ – two integral elements of the origins of the modern state and modern citizenship – both played a vital role. The democratic system was also seen as a model of stability. The region was a hotbed of potential conflict and instability caused by the collapse of the empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany. Their former territories had been devastated by savage conflicts, originating in disputes over frontiers and the national status of minorities, and fuelled



Fig. 1: Poster 'Votes for Women – Wanted Everywhere' from 1909, drawn by the British suffragette Hilda Dallas (1878-1958).

by territorial claims or contradictions between social groups and their political ambitions. Tension had been increasing between radicalised right-wing extremists and traditional conservatives, and between the socialist labour movement and the workers'

councils that were taking root thanks to the impact of the Russian Revolution. Under such circumstances, many women's rights supporters considered women and their female virtues as 'helpers' in constructing stable nation-states. They were acting as modern citizens but were still underprivileged and in fact deprived of rights, although women contributed to the national revival movement, actively participated in the First World War, took positions as professionals and factory workers, paid taxes, etc. This changed rapidly after 1918, when women became a symbol of modernity. They were modern *par excellence*² – they took new roles in society, the family and the professional field. In the very brief period after 1918, before Central and Eastern European societies turned to conservatism, the modern image of women had been used as a powerful weapon to both modernise the living environment and to 'cure' psychological, social and cultural backwardness.

Towards Equality

In no country did women gain political and civil rights without a struggle. However, the traditions of women's activism and the suffragette movements were different in Western and Eastern European countries. Feminist movements in Central and Eastern Europe operated on a much smaller scale than their American and British counterparts.³ At the turn of the century, the Western suffragettes claimed that women's rights had to be equal to men's rights.⁴ At the same time, the subjects under the imperial rule of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary had rather limited rights, although Austria-Hungary granted certain political rights for particular groups of Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Polish men and women. Hence, the struggles for independence in these countries appear to have been a general galvanising force⁵ in the universal suffrage movement and to have promoted the broader development of civil society.⁶

Women's enfranchisement was fought for not as a separate cause, but rather as a 'joint track' in the campaign for sovereign states and nations.⁷ Nationalism was accompanied by other factors, such as: general social changes within societies; historical conditions that forced women to take social positions of their men were no longer able to fill because they had died in the war; and economic transformation in the

process of modernisation in which the shift of labour from agriculture to other domains took place rapidly and more intensively for women than for men, mainly in industry, trade and public services.⁸ As a consequence, feminists argued that those citizens who had legal responsibilities and paid taxes also deserved rights in making decisions. However, most political parties, nationalist and socialist alike, had seen women rights as a secondary issue.

The left-wing forces were prone to defend universal suffrage on grounds of principle, whereas right-wing forces defended women rights on strategic grounds – both shared an easy predisposition to sacrifice justice for women for 'more important, urgent or compelling' causes.⁹ They argued that the emancipation of women should follow the liberation of the state/or of the proletariat/or both – the opinions varied between parties and individual politicians.¹⁰

Mothers of the Nation

The other triggering factor in electoral reforms was the recognition of women's commitment to the national movements and emphasising the idea of equality for modern nation-building. It partly originated from the belief that the path towards national self-consciousness begins in the family and that the mother plays a significant role in this process.¹¹ The idea of 'Mothers of the Nation' became stronger from the mid-19th century onwards, drawing on the development in women's education, which was believed to contribute to the improvement of national culture and the mother tongue.¹²

The strength of the National Revival Movement helped women formulate their demands for equality in education, as they made use of the fact that a nation in need of liberation from its oppressors is also in need of educated mothers for its sons and daughters.¹³ Later in the debate, those who supported women's rights based their argument on a concept of 'social motherhood'. It was emphasised that women's feminine qualities would benefit both women and society once they had been admitted to public and political life. 'Mothers of the Nation' represented female virtues such as morality, dedication and above all motherliness. These 'motherly' values not only made women fit for politics, they were also thought to help achieve a peaceful and united state and a

better, more just society. In Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, the relationship between feminism and nationalism was very strong.

The First World War and the Women's Suffrage Movement

For women in the West, as well as those in countries struggling for independence such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the contribution of women in the First World War played an important role in gaining universal suffrage. However, suffragists were divided by their different approaches towards the war. The International Women's Alliance called for pacifism and worked for peace, while other feminist groups urged service in the war effort or even direct military involvement – but all women saw the war as an opportunity to claim political and civil rights for themselves.¹⁴ Many suffrage supporters saw women's war contributions as a trigger in a possible shift from women's assigned social role as passive citizens, who could not request any active participation in state affairs, to citizens with full rights.¹⁵ As noted above, the idea of modern citizenship included the concept of the citizen soldier who, as a defender of the nation, was endowed with full rights, especially political ones. As the Austrian historian Brigitta Bader-Zaar has pointed out:

Suffragists were thus one of many groups who recognized the opportunity to claim citizenship and to emphasize women's service to the nation during the war. They expanded the idea of citizenship to include themselves as active, not passive members of the nation and argued that women were 'citizens with duties towards the general public'. Their relief work was proof of their 'patriotism and their fitness for citizenship'; they were the 'soldiers on the home front'.¹⁶

However, many scholars stress that the 'illusory nature of wartime change', as Higonnets has phrased it, lasted 'only for the duration', after which came backswings.¹⁷ Although the situation of women did change after the First World War, the old relationships of domination and subordination were retained. There was also a discrepancy between the situation of Western and Eastern European women.



Fig. 2: 'Patriotic emancipation' – Waleria Frąckowiak wearing the uniform of an ensign in the Army of Greater Poland, Poznań 1919.

In Western Europe, the wartime struggle created opportunities for many women to go to work and take on the roles of their absent men; in the nations struggling for sovereignty, meanwhile, women had already been attempting to take on male roles for decades. In most cases, active women were still forced to seek political influence by gaining access to male decision-makers in private spheres (salons), which were traditionally associated with femininity.¹⁸

One example of the combined factors of 'soft power', diplomatic forces and active service during the First World War is provided by the devoted Polish feminist Aleksandra Piłsudska (1882-1963) née Szczerbińska, Marshall Józef Piłsudski's (1867-1935) life partner. Piłsudska had been involved in the main



Fig. 3: Aleksandra Piłsudska, Polish feminist and life partner of Józef Piłsudski.

revolutionary movement of the Polish Socialist Party since 1904, and she actively participated in the partisan, subversive actions of an illegal guerrilla unit, the Combat Organisation of the Polish Socialist Party (Organizacja Bojowa Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej) led by Józef Piłsudski. The most famous action was the so-called Bezdany raid in 1908, when Piłsudski and twenty others, including Aleksandra Piłsudska and three future Polish Prime Ministers Tomasz Arciszewski (1877-1955), Aleksander Prystor (1874-1941) and Walery Sławek (1879-1939), assaulted a Russian train carrying tax revenues near Vilnius. Piłsudska was also a leader of the Women's League – a women's military group with 20,000 members during the First World War.¹⁹ Thus, we can speculate that it was Aleksandra Piłsudska who helped her hesitating husband to make a final decision on the issue of electoral reform. On 28 November, Polish women finally obtained full political rights. However, the law excluded minority women and those from the autonomous province of the Silesian Voivodeship.

The First Women Deputies in National Parliaments

On January 1919, in the first general parliamentary election to the Polish Legislative Sejm (Diet), women's participation was noticeable (66.9% of the female electorate voted, along with 71.5% of the male electorate). However, only six women were elected as Deputies (1.38% of all Diet members), and none were chosen as Senators. In years to follow, the number of women representatives to Parliaments remained extremely low (2-4% overall). Public opinion was male dominated, and although the socialist, peasant and nationalist parties all made intensive efforts to win women's votes, women candidates to the Parliaments were openly discriminated against, as their names were placed on lists of candidates in the positions doomed to fail.²⁰

In 1918, Hungarian women also attained suffrage, although in a limited form. According to the law accepted by the Autumn (Democratic) Revolution, literate women above the age of 24 were granted electoral rights. In the spring of 1919, a new political turn swept away these regulations and the Hungarian Soviet Republic introduced universal rights to vote. However, electoral rights were linked with trade union membership, and 'non-proletarians' were thus excluded from the elections.²¹ After the brief era of the Soviet commune, ending in autumn 1919, the new right-wing rule that defined the following decades overturned these regulations, restricting electoral rights and linking them to the census (according to age, literacy, property or family status). Universal suffrage rights were introduced in Hungary only after the Second World War in 1945.²²

Hungarian women first participated in elections in 1922, and the first woman member of Parliament, Margit Slachta, was elected that year. Hungary was also the very first state in the world represented by a woman ambassador – Rózsika Schwimmer (1877-1948). Mihály Károlyi's (1875-1955) government named this Hungarian-American feminist, suffragette, journalist and politician the ambassador to Switzerland in 1918.

In its first constitution, the independent Czechoslovak state granted men and women equal suffrage rights in 1920, and women actively participated in the Parliamentary elections that same year. Thirteen women were elected to the Chamber of Deputies (300



Fig. 4: The feminist, journalist, and politician Rózsika Schwimmer.

seats) and three to the Senate (150 seats). 54% of the voters were women, as opposed to 46% men. In years to follow, the number of women representatives to Parliaments rose gradually.²³ Czechoslovak women found supporters in President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) and First Lady and American feminist Charlotte Garrigue (1850-1923) (whose maiden name Masaryk adopted). They supported higher education for all women, involvement in the labour market and society in general as well as political rights; thus, Czechoslovak suffragettes did not need to fight as hard for equal rights as women in other countries.

In all these countries, the group of women deputies was distinguished by its educational background. Two-thirds of the women representatives were university graduates, with the remaining third having graduated from secondary schools. In contrast, a quarter of the men had only graduated from

elementary schools. Women members of Parliament also originated from different social backgrounds, with the majority coming from the upper and middle class. It was women from the intelligentsia elite that had previous experience of activity in public institutions, had benefited from the female education movement, were involved in the phenomenon of women's publishing works and had actively participated in paramilitary organisations during the First World War. In consequence, women deputies were better prepared to play an active role in politics than the majority of elected men.²⁴

The Rights of Working Women

There was no unity in the feminist movements, and working-class and middle-class women generally fought for different goals. Access to higher education, professional training and electoral rights was a key struggle for middle-class women, who saw civil and political rights as a prerequisite of an active citi-



Fig. 5: The American feminist Charlotte Garrigue, wife of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.

zenship and social equality. This group also benefited the most from the intense changes in social hierarchy as new occupations emerged, mainly in the arts, science and the civil service.²⁵ Female labour rapidly expanded in those sectors. However, women were not readily accepted as professionals and were encouraged to leave their positions, especially white-collar work, on marriage.

Proletarian women in general fought for social rights for working women, in particular the extensive protection of maternity rights, employment protection, absent representation by unions, night work for women and a minimum age in industry. All groups fought for equal pay for equal work and against discrimination in promotion procedures to

higher professional ranks.²⁶ In 1919, women achieved an international standard-setting declaration for working conditions and the Maternity Protection Convention passed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention at the ILO Conference held in Washington. The ILO, a United Nations agency, had decided upon the adoption of certain proposals with regard to 'women's employment, before and after childbirth, including the question of maternity benefits'.²⁷ In addition, the same organization regulated a maximum number of working hours per day and week, protection of children and young persons, worker protection against sickness and injuries, and recognition of freedom of association. The areas of improvement listed remain relevant today.



Fig. 6: Women activists on the way to a rally in Warsaw, 1930. At the head Stanisława Woszczyńska (1879-1967; front row, 2nd from the left) and Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka (1867-1936; with a tie and white shirt).



Fig. 7: Poster of the Exhibition of the Modern Woman (Výstava moderní ženy), Brno 1929.

The years 1918-1923 – just after women attained political rights and for the first time exercised them in national elections – were a period of optimism and belief in the radical improvement of women's situation and in equality, but they were shortly followed by a more sobering period. Although women attained full electoral rights and entered the public sphere, they were successfully kept from political power in legislative bodies, for example by putting women's names last in candidate lists. Thus, women were disappointed with the limits of their political influence. Many feminists, especially those of a younger generation, now more strongly emphasised equal rights and stressed full equality with men as the only way for women to gain agency and finally achieve full citizenship.²⁸

While the constitutions of many newly founded states offered equality for both men and women, the debate was really only just starting on women's citizenship and their new role in society. Equality rights were not fully implemented and women were discriminated against in all fields. Even as women were very slowly becoming accepted as professional colleagues, their promotion to higher positions was limited. Similarly, women were admitted to universities and academies, including higher education in law and medicine, but they had little opportunity to work as academics after graduation.

It wasn't until the late 1920s that the new or modern woman and 'femininity' were promoted by publications such as the Czechoslovak magazine *Moderní dívka* (The Modern Girl) or *Civilizovaná žena* (The Civilized Woman), exhibitions such as *Výstava moderní ženy* (The Exhibition of the Modern Woman, Brno 1929) or the Polish book and film *Prokurator Alicja Horn* (Prosecuting Attorney Alicja Horn, 1933). The story of Horn was a fiction, as there was no woman attorney in Poland until 1937, and the first woman judge was nominated only in 1929. Women trained themselves as professionals, but women's rights were put on the back burner.

Endnotes

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