

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE 80 YEARS

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Foreword

In a letter sent out to various Finnish organisations in December 1985, the Council for Gender Equality emphasised the significance of 1986 as the 80th anniversary of Finnish women's right to vote and stand for election. To mark the occasion, the Prime Minister's Office commissioned a study on this historic event from the historian Hannele Kurki.

Finnish women were the first European women to gain the right to vote and stand for election. This significant event has never been studied from the point of view of women, but rather only as part of general political developments, without any special characteristics of its own. It is to be hoped that the growing interest in the history of women will shed new light also on the political activities of Finnish women.

Helsinki, 8 March 1986, the International Women's Day

Eeva-Liisa Tuominen

Secretary General

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE 80 YEARS

The parliamentary reform of 1906 was issued on 20 July in St Petersburg and it entered into force on 1 October the same year. The preparation of the reform, which introduced a universal and equal suffrage as well as the right to stand for election, was characterised by rapid political developments. Events of crucial importance took place only within a few days, and within a few months only, the old Diet had been replaced by a modern parliament. Whereas during the last days of the Diet, the number of people entitled to vote was about 126,000, their number in the first elections of the unicameral parliament had grown to 1,272,873. Two new large groups of electors were made up of women and of workers. In fact, women accounted for 52 per cent of the electorate.

Even though it was a universally held truth that suffrage was only meant for men, opinions in favour of universal and equal suffrage had increasingly been expressed since the late 19th century. In many countries, women had started advocating for equal rights between women and men. Women's opportunities to participate in societal decision-making were rather modest. Society accepted economic benefits from women – such as taxes, which were a burden of equal weight for women and men – but, in return, denied them of any social rights.

1. Finnish women's early suffrage and right to stand for election

Finnish women were the first European women to gain the right to vote. Women had been granted the right to vote in New Zealand in 1893, in Australia in 1902 and in some states of the USA in the 1890s. Finnish women were almost the first in the world to gain the right to stand for election, for in New Zealand, women's eligibility to stand for election was restricted to white women only. In Australia, women received the right to stand for election in addition to the right to vote in 1902, but they exercised this right for the first time only in the 1940s. Despite the fact that the suffragette movement had started in the political and ideological centres of the world, such as London and New York, it

seems that the objectives of this movement were first implemented in the peripheral areas of the world. For example, in spite of the strident suffragette movement in Britain, women's suffrage became a reality there only after the First World War (gradually between 1918 and 1928).

In most Nordic countries, women first received the right to vote in local elections, and then in national elections. In Finland, however, women first voted in national elections in 1906 and in municipal elections in 1917. In Table 1 below, "universal" suffrage is defined in various ways, but in all instances it does refer to extensive suffrage. In Norway, for example, universal suffrage was implemented in municipal elections in 1910. Women with personal income were allowed to vote in the national elections of 1907 and, finally in 1913, all women were included in the electorate.

In Finland, women had achieved the right to vote in municipal elections, first in rural areas in 1865 and then in the cities in 1873. According to municipal statutes, unmarried and divorced women as well as widows had equal rights with men with regard to voting in municipal elections. Women, nevertheless, did not have the right to stand for election. In their class, women had equal rights with men, as the municipal statutes did not provide for universal and equal suffrage for men either. Those who did not manage their own affairs and property, in other words, were not legally competent, did not have right to vote. Such people included married women, who were under the guardianship of their husbands, and people who were under someone else's mastership, such as factory workers in the cities. It was only in 1917 that municipal legislation was reformed to include universal and equal suffrage and the right to stand for election. The Parliament had passed similar municipal legislation as early as in 1908, but the Tsar had not approved it.

Table 1. Implementation of universal suffrage in municipal and national elections in the Nordic countries.

Year	Right to vote in national elections		Right to vote in municipal elections	
	Women	Men	Woman	Men
1849		Denmark		
1857		Iceland		
1865				Denmark
1872				Iceland
1898		Norway		
1901				Norway
1906	Finland	Finland		
1907		Sweden		
1908			Denmark	
1909			Iceland	Sweden
1910			Norway	
1913	Norway, Iceland			
1915	Denmark			
1917			Finland	Finland
1918			Sweden	
1921	Sweden			

Source: *Keskeneräinen kansanvalta. Naiset Pohjoismaiden politiikassa*. Eds. Haavio-Mannila et al., p. 69.

The achievement of Finnish women and men gaining full political rights simultaneously must be accredited to the women's rights movement and the worker's movement. The underlying forces behind the parliamentary reform included the Russo-Japanese War, unrest among Russian workers and the General Strike in Finland in 1905. As a result of these factors, the Tsar had to concede to the establishment of such a parliament that would grant universal suffrage and the right to stand for election for both sexes.

Since the 1860s, various representatives in the Diet had submitted motions for the expansion of the electorate. The first motion concerning women's right to vote was submitted in 1897 by A. Herckman, V. Lögren, A. Hjelt, E. Erkkö and G.R. Idman, who represented the Estate of the Burghers. This motion proposed expanding the right to vote in some degree in all other estates except for the Nobility; this meant that women and men should be given equal rights to vote in the elections of these estates. The Diet's Law Committee, which processed submitted motions, recommended in its memorandum that an initiative by the estate be submitted, requesting a government bill for the next Diet. In its memorandum, the Law Committee favoured the expansion of the electorate, but opposed granting women the right to stand for election. The Committee thought that it was "inappropriate to draw women into political life, especially since experiences of women's right to vote in municipal elections are so scarce that no definite conclusions can be drawn from them."

The Law Committee's memorandum included one dissenting opinion. A. Aminoff, a representative of the Estate of the Nobles, together with four other representatives of the Burghers and Peasants in the Committee, defended women's right to vote in national elections. In their opinion, granting women the right to vote in national elections would not only be a just, but also a wise deed, "for through this act we would bring into politics elements defending our society; such a politically mature and conservative nation as Britain has recently wished to take heed of this aspect." Even though the Noble and Burger Estates at first accepted the idea of women's suffrage as presented in the objection, the matter was dropped, because the estates were not unanimous in the matter. The initiative recommended by the Law Committee was sent to the Tsar, and it resulted in a government bill, which, however, was introduced to the Diet as late as 1904-05.

When this bill was discussed by the 1904-05 Diet, only the Estate of the Peasants was ready to approve women's right to vote. The Estate of the Nobles, which was controlled by the constitutionalists, did not even discuss the matter. The Swedish-speaking conservative majority of the Estate of the Burgers rejected the bill's proposal for women's suffrage on the grounds that women were not created for public life. A

woman's world was made up of the home and family; a man's world culminated in politics. The Diet spoke out on the issue of suffrage on a more general level as well: were universal and equal suffrage granted to men, the majority would oppress the minorities; consequently, there was no reason to grant women even a restricted right to vote at this point. The pro-Finnish opposition of the Burghers, the Young Finns, were in favour of a universal and equal suffrage, but only concerning men.

2. The General Strike pours oil on the fire

The times of the General Strike in Finland, which took place between 30 October and 8 November 1905, were violent and dangerous. In order to calm down the situation, the Tsar issued a manifesto giving the Finnish Senate the task of preparing a new Parliament Act. The purpose of this Act was to modernise the Finnish national assembly, applying the principle of universal and equal suffrage in electing its members.

Even though the party system was not fully organised in the early years of the 20th century, the attitudes of certain political fractions vis-à-vis the parliamentary reform and especially women's suffrage were widely known. At a conference of the Young Finns, Dr. Santeri Ingman (later Ivalo) raised the issue of whether married women were to be granted the right to vote, for they were, under current legislation, under the guardianship of their husbands. Ingman favoured married women's right to vote, despite cautionary examples from abroad. He thought that women's inclusion in the electorate would bring a necessary and useful addition to elections. In this same conference of 16 November 1905, declarations by a women's assembly held earlier in Tampere were read aloud. These declarations demanding women's right to vote were presented to the Young Finns "by two Young Finns, to the Old Finns by two Old Finns and to the Labour Party by two members of the worker's movement". After a heated debate, the Young Finns conference approved of universal, equal and immediate suffrage for both men and women.

The delegation of the Swedish Party convened on 13 November 1905 to discuss the parliamentary reform. Without debating the issue at any greater length, the party decided

in favour of universal suffrage and the right to stand for election for all men and women over 25 years of age.

The Labour Party in its founding meeting in Turku in 1899 had already taken a unanimous stand in favour of universal and equal suffrage.

To alleviate the tension created by the General Strike, the constitutional Senate appointed a committee to plan the parliamentary reform. The Parliamentary Reform Committee was chaired by Professor Robert Hermanson, a renowned scholar of political science and the members included several representatives of the law profession. The Committee discussed general principles on 12 December 1905, and on the same day it also decided in favour of granting women the vote. Hermanson was the only one to voice a dissenting opinion, which he held until the very end. According to him, objective reasons spoke against women's right to vote. He believed that women's participation in political life would cause more damage than good, because women as emotional beings were likely to be swayed to extreme stands. He admitted that it could be said that it was unjust to deny women the vote, putting them in a position where they had to observe laws passed by others. But such thinking would ruin the fabric of society. Women, of course, were not forced to limit their activities to the home, but could perform important tasks in the various sectors of society. But Hermanson was convinced that politics was in conflict with women's basic nature.

Banker Felix Heikel of the Swedish Party also had his doubts about women's suffrage. He came to the conclusion, however, that the arguments in favour of women's vote were weightier than the counter arguments. Another banker on the Committee, the Swedish Party's F. Schybergson, supported women's suffrage because women had joined men in the national struggle against Russian oppression and had suffered side by side with men. Santeri Alkio, a writer from the Young Finns Party, pointed out: "... now that we are giving the vote to farm hands, why not give it to our best educators. Women's morals are often higher than men's. There is no need to fear that they will misuse their vote."

The discussion proper on women's suffrage took place the following day, on 13 December 1905. While Hermanson remained in opposition, the other Committee members expressed their opinions. According to the future President J. K. Paasikivi, the expansion of the electorate should take place on the condition that the new electors should really know how to exercise their right. Were women now denied the vote, it would be seen as a direct sign of mistrust for electors. Paasikivi saw women as a valuable, moderate element especially in economic decision-making. As managers of households they had learned to exercise greater self-control than men.

E. Valpas, a journalist for the *Työmies* (Worker) newspaper, was known as a Marxist theoretician and politician. To him, it was only natural to grant women the right to stand for election, as Finnish women held a much more independent position in society compared with many other countries. "As women in our present society suffer greater poverty than men, they should be given the opportunity to speak for themselves."

J. R. Danielson, Councillor of State, approved of women's suffrage, but was of the opinion that the Committee should grant women only the right to vote. The issue of the right to stand for election could be taken up later. Although Danielson had his doubts, he hoped that women would settle for the right to vote. P. E. Svinhufvud of the Young Finns, another future President, saw no other alternative but to grant women the right to stand for election, as the decision to grant them the vote had already been made. Danielson raised a concern for Russia's attitude towards women's right to stand for election. Schybergson joined him in this concern, for "the issue will be impossible for the Russians and others. A parliament with female representatives will be regarded as red, extremely red."

The majority of the Parliamentary Reform Committee decided in favour of granting the right to vote and the right to stand for election for both men and women. Only Hermanson submitted a written objection to women's right to stand for election.

Next, the Committee's memorandum was discussed by the Senate. The overall grounds for women's suffrage were not of great concern to the Senate. Before the General Strike, the term "universal and equal suffrage" had unambiguously referred to men only, but during the strike, public opinion broadened its scope to include women as well. The Senate was more concerned about women's right to stand for election. Senators Mechelin, Wrede and Ståhlberg, however, pointed out that no difference should be made between those eligible to vote and those eligible for election. The Senate Committee was almost unanimous in accepting the proposal according to which all those with the right to vote would also have the right to stand for election. Women's right to stand for election was still a strange notion to many, but in the special circumstances of the times, they were willing to adjust to this new idea.

The Senate's proposal for a new Parliament Act and Election Act was sent to Governor-General Nikolai Gerhard, who was to forward the proposal to St Petersburg to the Minister Secretary of State for presentation to the sovereign. The Governor-General sent his final statement on the reform to the Minister Secretary of State on 30 March 1906. In this statement he did not wish to oppose the Senate on the matter of women's suffrage, for he had total confidence in the Senate's expertise on this matter. Nor did the Finnish-Russian negotiating body, which prepared matters for presentation to the sovereign, wish to oppose women's suffrage. The Russian members of the negotiating body regarded it as a local issue only, which did not concern the greater interests of the Russian Empire.

Tsar Nicholas II approved the proposal prepared by the Finnish-Russian negotiating body almost in its original form. In May, a bill was submitted to the Diet, which spent fairly little time discussing it. Senator Mechelin had a prestigious position within the Estate of the Nobles, which meant that the nobility was in favour of women's suffrage. The Estate of the Clergy did not vote on the matter – even Hermanson now consented with the majority. The Estate of the Burgers was unanimous in supporting universal and equal suffrage. The Estate of the Peasants declared "all aboard!".

The Tsar ratified the bill for a parliamentary reform on 20 July 1906. The Finnish parliamentary reform met no opposition with the Russian rulers; in the ongoing political crisis in Russia, the rulers were only interested in the power politics between Finland and Russia.

3. Women's activities for the right to vote and stand for election

Although there were rapid political changes behind the parliamentary reform that granted women the right to vote, women's own activities were not without significance. During the General Strike, women's activism spread from towns to rural areas, and wider and wider circles stood behind the demand for universal and equal suffrage. For example, the Parliamentary Reform Committee received a women's petition with 25,000 names and women's assemblies and gatherings were frequent during the months following the strike. Public discussion on the status of women in Finland encouraged these events.

When the Diet of Finland reopened again after a long pause in 1863, the representatives engaged in a lively discussion over the position of women already then. In discussing the legal competence of unmarried women, the representatives agreed that once women were freed from guardianship, they would become citizens. The chairman of the Estate of the Clergy, Archbishop Edvard Bergenheim, stated that social development was now so advanced that the Christian principles of equality between all people could be applied to women's civil rights as well. The Archbishop probably did not mean concrete political rights when talking about women's civil rights, but nevertheless, women were seen as potentially competent members of society, as citizens. The concept of 'citizen' had received a new abstract meaning that was closely related to the idea of people belonging to the same state.

Women also emphasised the idea of belonging to a state – first they only had to obtain the opportunity to have a say in the management of common affairs. The writer and women's rights advocate Minna Canth wrote in 1886 to G. W. Edlund, a publisher: "It is not a question of a frivolous desire for revolution, but it is our hard, serious life which

forces women and workers to oppose society in its present state. And since the reasons for this lie deep, they will not hear of any return to the way things were or of any reaction before they have reached their goal. No consideration for 'the state of affairs', historical developments or 'political wisdom' can force them to suffer from injustice, unless they are given the right to participate in the making of laws and thus change circumstances for the better and affect the course of historical developments".

Hilda Asp wrote along the same lines in her letter to writer Elias Erkkö, commenting on the debate in the Diet over women's right to enrol at the university: "It felt odd to sit there as a woman, to sit there in the crowd, curious and uneasy, listening to how the decision-makers decided over our fate, debated and voted on whether women should be allowed to study at the university, just like a few weeks ago, they decided on the grazing of foals. I felt so heavy. I could not help but wonder whose fault it was that I was not one of those men, that I was not allowed to sit among them and decide over the fate of the surrounding mute and worthless women. Or how would it feel on both sides if we, the present mute, sat on the representatives' seats, and the men waited speechless around us, listening to some woman predicting social decadence or the doom of the entire humankind, were men given the opportunity to prove, without special permission, their knowledge in some field of speciality. In granting and adjusting rights for our fathers, husbands and brothers, and regarding these rights as not inherent for them, we would probably grow accustomed to seeing them as inferior objects who can gain meaning and purpose only through the use we have of them".

Today we regard political rights, such as the right to vote and the right to stand for election, to be among the inalienable rights of a legally competent individual. In the past, the relationship between legal competence and citizenship was much debated, for, especially in the 19th century, one of the most burning political issues in many countries was the right of representation. In Finland also, there was controversy among the legal profession over whether married women, who were under the guardianship of their husbands, should be entitled to civil rights, or whether these should be granted to unmarried, legally competent women only.

In Finland, public debate over women's civil rights and political representation was not as heated as in the United States. In discussing an amendment to a Civil Rights Act, Susan B. Anthony, a renowned women's rights activist, questioned in 1873 whether women are citizens or not: "I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons, then, women are citizens, and no State has a right to make any new law, or to enforce any old law, that shall abridge their privileges or immunities." The common way of thinking was to differentiate between two kinds of citizenship: there were citizens with civil rights and citizens without civil rights. In the 19th century, civil rights, such as suffrage and the right to earn a living, depended on the wealth of an individual and thus did not belong to everyone. On the other hand, until the late 19th century, conceptions of womanhood were dominated by qualities such as modesty, coyness and self-denial. Marriage, giving birth to children and raising them were women's purpose in life. In principle, a legally independent, self-supporting single woman was an alien concept to society. A married woman's world was made up of the home and family; men's world included public activities which culminated in politics.

The achievement of the right to vote in national elections was characterised by more numerous conflicts than the achievement of the right to vote in local elections. Nordic women, however, never resorted to such radical measures as the British suffragettes. Nordic women used peaceful measures and acted within the boundaries of the law, given that their movement was quite agitated at times. In Finland, the exchange of opinions over the principles of women's suffrage took place mainly between female advocates of women's rights and the men who either supported or opposed them, the forums being newspaper columns and flyers, different meetings and committees of the Diet.

In the non-socialist parties, women's suffrage was tied to the level of either education or wealth, if the members of these parties favoured women's right to vote in the first place. In its founding meeting in Turku in 1899, the Labour Party unanimously supported universal and equal suffrage. Interestingly enough, the struggle for women's right to vote played a crucial role in the rapid growth of the women workers' movement. The

membership of the national Women Workers' Union grew from 10,000 to 19,000 in the wake of the General Strike. Women accounted for a quarter of the total membership of the Social Democratic Party. The interests of the non-socialist women's movement were in the expansion of educational and professional opportunities for women; naturally, these demands sprang from their own life circumstances. Even if educated women advocated these opportunities for all women equally, in reality, they were the only ones able to take advantage of those opportunities.

Among the first statements on the issue of women's suffrage was made by Adelaide Ehnroth in her article in the newspaper *Helsingfors Dagbladet* in 1869. In this article she reviewed the newly published original English-language edition of *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill (translated into Finnish only in 1910 under the title *Naisen asema*). Adelaide Ehnroth thought that women, who were accountable for their actions before the law, had to participate in the making of laws. Women had to submit, even if their guardians – their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons – had, so far, looked after their interests in a way that Adelaide Ehnroth considered untrustworthy.

Like Adelaide Ehnroth, Hanna Ongel in her book *Tankar om några samhällsfrågor* (Helsinki 1881) endorsed women's suffrage. According to her, those subject to the law have to be able to influence legislation. This same argument was used in debates within the Parliamentary Reform Committee.

At its establishment, the Finnish Women's Association introduced women's suffrage on its agenda. The association regulations from 1884 include the objective of the right to vote in national elections, but not the right to stand for election. The pro-vote activities of Unioni, the League of Finnish Feminists, culminated in a public rally held in Helsinki 7 November 1904 that attracted wide public attention. The meeting unanimously demanded equal civil rights to all citizens of good reputation, regardless of sex, wealth and education. The League submitted to the Diet a petition prepared by the meeting, demanding for the right to vote in national elections for women on the same grounds as for men.

Hilda Käkikoski of the Women's Association held a speech on the premises of the Helsinki Fire Brigade on 4 November 1904 and deplored that Ms. Maija Kovanen, a shopkeeper, could not vote, whereas Mr. Matti Kovanen, a shopkeeper, could. An educated woman who had established a primary school and carried out wonderful innovations at her farms, was not eligible to elect the lawmakers. A farmer, who had benefited from his neighbour's innovations and whose children went to the school established by the neighbour, was eligible to elect the lawmakers. Undoubtedly, Hilda Käkikoski's speech contained opinions based on class division, but also argumentation based on natural law, defending women's right to vote. She saw women's suffrage as "the most natural and unchanging right for women".

Men resorted to the same arguments in their defence of women's suffrage. In 1884, two governors submitted a petition to the Senate, advocating a limited right for women to vote in the elections of the Estate of Burgers. The Governor of Häme Province, E. R. von Arnmond, gave the following grounds for the petition: "Without any doubt, women have a natural right to participate in legislation, for they are subject to all legislation in the same way as men. There is also a great number of independent individuals among women, that is to say, unmarried, fully competent women; it is my conviction that they, at least, should be granted the right to vote".

At the final stages of the struggle for women's suffrage, differing opinions on the issue met for the last time in the Parliamentary Reform Committee chaired by Professor Hermanson. Women's "nature" was not discussed, although it was mentioned. The focus of the debate was on the universal and equal right to vote and to stand for election.

4. Beyond the right to vote and stand for election

The achievement of women's suffrage and the right to stand for election marked a turning point in the history of the women's movement. A total of 19 women were elected to the first parliament, nine of whom were social democrats and ten non-socialists. Women MPs

accounted for 9.5% of the total number of MPs. Among the first female MPs in Finland's unicameral parliament included Ida Aalle-Teljo, Hilda Pärssinen, Miina Sillanpää, Alexandra Gripenberg, Hilda Käkikoski, Hedvig Gebhard, Tekla Hultin, Lucina Hagman and Vera Hjelt.

The motions put forward by female MPs focused, besides the issues directly related to women's status, on the home and on moral issues. Temperance, social problems and women's health were the common interests of all female MPs, regardless of party politics.

After the victorious road to suffrage, there were also moments of disappointment. Party politics turned out to be more influential than women's cooperation in improving the position of women in society. The feminist Maikki Friberg had eagerly campaigned for a women's party, which was never formed. Women could enter the Parliament only as members of the existing political parties. Causes for disappointment included the frequent dissolutions of the parliament, the slow progress of the political agenda and the increasing tension in national politics.

Soon after the achievement of women's suffrage, the activities of the women's movement slowed down. This is only natural, considering that as a result of a few fervent years, women's societal activities reached a high point. The quieting down of the women's movement does not mean that women would have been content with suffrage alone; after the parliamentary reform, women formed closer links with parties, which were assumed to be efficient instruments for implementing reforms improving the position of women. Suffrage did not solve the problems related women's social status, but the suffragette movement did unite women to pursue a common goal in a totally novel way.

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