

Suffrage, gender and citizenship in Finland

A comparative perspective

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Summary

Finland was the first European country where women gained the full political rights. The reform, carried out in a political inflammable situation after the great strike in 1905, was pioneering: it gave women not only the right to vote but also to stand as candidates for Parliament. In Finland, as well as in other young nations, the early suffrage of women was connected with strong national aspirations and in these nations democracy also emerged rapidly. Furthermore the right to vote was the most salient vehicle to regulate the limits and contents of citizenship including a new notion of genders. Due to the cultural background, which was strongly bound with agricultural tradition, the relationship between genders in Finland contained some peculiar features. This, associated with a favourable political situation, enabled the early entry of Finnish women into Parliament.

Zusammenfassung

Finnland war das erste europäische Land, welches Frauen vollständige politische Rechte zugestand. Die in der politisch aufgeheizten Situation nach dem Generalstreik von 1905 durchgeführte bahnbrechende Reform sprach Frauen nicht nur das aktive, sondern auch das passive Wahlrecht zu. Wie auch in anderen jungen Nationen war das frühe Frauenwahlrecht in Finnland mit starken nationalen Bestrebungen sowie einer rapiden Demokratisierung verbunden. Außerdem bot das Stimmrecht eine hervorragende Möglichkeit, die Grenzen der Bedeutung von staatsbürgerlicher Partizipation zu definieren und brachte zugleich eine neue Genderperzeption mit sich. Aufgrund der besonderen kulturellen Bedeutung der landwirtschaftlichen Tradition beinhaltete die Ausgestaltung der Geschlechterbeziehung einige besondere Komponenten, welche, gepaart mit einer günstigen politischen Situation, den frühen Einzug von Frauen ins Parlament ermöglichte.

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Introduction¹

We have learned from many studies that the concepts of gender, suffrage and citizenship cannot be separated. In one way or another, the link has always existed, but it was particularly obvious in the intensive struggle for the vote for women which began in the Western world towards the end of the 19th century and reached its peak in the early 20th century. Among these three concepts, gender was the one which became most salient in those years, especially in Britain and the United States. Consequently, the other aspects of civil rights – such as race, language or ethnicity, as well as the rights of people suffering from physical or mental deprivation – were largely suppressed by the gender struggle. Of course, they were present but became important issues only some decades later.

Based on the research done on suffrage, we also know that each of the three concepts were linked in an original way depending on the cultural and societal situation in each country – for example, factors such as various forms of nationalism, religion, political ideologies, social structures and differences in how the world and humankind were perceived. As the range of studies has become more varied, we have learned that the basic narratives of national history do not follow a set pattern, and it is equally difficult to fit the process of bringing about women's votes in different countries into one unified theoretical framework, despite the many shared features. Indeed, recent studies suggest that the earlier suffrage narratives, which underlined the above mentioned characteristics, have started to unravel themselves, revealing several local factors that impacted upon the formation of gender-based citizenship. Likewise, the women's rights objectives have been discovered to be complex links involving some culturally and socially repressing features.²

¹ This article is based on Sulkunen, Irma: „Suomi naisten äänioikeuden edelläkävijänä [Finland as a Forerunner in Women's Vote]“. In: idem et al. (eds.): *Naiset eduskunnassa [Women in the Parliament]*. Helsinki 2006, 10–82, 280–284. On the subject see also idem: “The Women's Movement”. In: Max Engman and David Kirby (eds.): *Finland: People, Nation, State*. London 1989, 178–192; Sulkunen, Irma: “The Mobilisation of Women and the Birth of Civil Society”. In: Merja Manninen and Päivi Setälä (eds.): *The Lady with the Bow. The Story of Finnish Women*. Keuruu 1990, 42–54; Sulkunen, Irma: “Finland – Pionier des Wahlrechts für Frauen”. In: Marjaliisa Hentilä and Alexander Schug (eds.): *Von Heute an für Alle! Hundert Jahre Frauenwahlrecht*. Berlin 2006, 11–23.

² For publications on research of women's suffrage done in recent years see, for instance: Daley, Caroline and Melanie Nolan (eds.): *Suffrage & Beyond. International Feminist Per-*

The Finnish case is mainly an outstanding example of how difficult it is to separate the vote for women from the framework of various concepts of citizenship. Moreover, it shows how important it is to understand the political, social and cultural context in which radical reform took place. In my attempt to answer the question of why Finnish women were the first in Europe to get the vote and become eligible for Parliament, I will start by looking at how suffrage, class and nationalism were intertwined in Finland. Then I will go on to shed some light on political mobilisation, which is an integral part of the democratic process; how it helped to bring about the women's vote. Finally, I will extend my analysis to the cultural foundations which underpinned the movement towards suffrage reform and which ultimately made the radical outcome of the suffrage question possible.

I will study the Finnish case from an international comparative perspective, but I will base my study on original sources only as far as Finland is concerned. The international comparisons are based on the studies done about the subject. In the following phase of my project, the study will also involve the primary international sources.³

Suffrage, class and nationalism

When Finland's unicameral Parliament convened for the first time in March 1907, there were 19 women among the newly elected Members of Parliament (MPs). The social Democrats were the largest group with 80 seats, nine of which were held by women. Among these nine were four outstanding women. The most well known was the leader of the Maid Association, the former female servant Miina Sillanpää who was to become Finland's first female minister in 1926. There were also the frontline labour women activists: Hilja Pärssinen, teacher; Ida Ahlstedt, seamstress; and Anni Huotari, mother of numerous children. Among the ten women in the non-socialist group were: Baroness Aleksandra Gripenberg; Lucina Hagman and Hilda Käkikoski, also a teacher; as well as Eveliina Alakulju, a farmer's wife from Ostrobothnia. All in

spectives. Auckland 1994; Grimshaw, Patricia et al. (eds.): *Women's Rights and Human Rights. International Historical Perspectives*. New York 2001; On the women's vote in European countries see also Bock, Gisela: *Women in European History*. Oxford 2003; Offen, Karen: *European Feminism 1700–1950*. Stanford 2000; Eustance, Claire et al. (eds.): *A Suffrage Reader. Charting Directions in British Suffrage History*. London / New York 2000.

³ This study will be published through Edwin Mellen Press (New York / Lampeter) at the end of 2007.

all, the group of 19 women consisted of less than ten percent of all 200 MPs. Nevertheless, they played an extraordinary role: they were first women in Europe to obtain both the vote and the right to stand as candidates in parliamentary elections.⁴

Although the first Parliament included women of all social classes, the radical reform cannot be solely attributed to them. On the contrary, the struggle for universal and equal suffrage had led to conflict among the different groups of women. This in turn continued in the form of a struggle for political power within Parliament. The deepest chasm was between the Social Democrats on the one hand and the women of the middle-class parties, on the other. The most severe criticism came from the only noblewoman among the first female MPs, Aleksandra Gripenberg, who was appalled by the fact that these women came from the lower classes. She was particularly offended by the fact that washerwomen and female servants were participating in legislative work side by side with prestigious male MPs.⁵

The social mixture of Europe's first female MPs, as well as the conflicts among them, reveal the crucial aspects of the historical process which enabled Finnish women to get their full political rights. This process was characterized by features common to both the international suffrage movement and especially to the Finnish suffrage movement. An international study of suffrage reforms makes clear, for example, an interesting aspect: not only in Finland but also in other countries awarding political citizenship to women, it was generally associated with important national events, such as war and the struggle for independence. This was the case with New Zealand and Australia where the British colonies used the autonomous parliamentary systems to set themselves part from the mother country, while at the same time outlining the limits of citi-

⁴ Markkola, Pirjo et al. (eds.): *Yksi kamari – kaksi sukupuolta. Suomen eduskunnan ensimmäiset naiset [One Chamber – Two Genders. The first women in the Parliament of Finland]*. Helsinki 1997.

⁵ Hentilä, Marjaliisa: "Maa jossa piiatkin saivat äänestää. Suomen työläisnaisliikkeen kuva kansainvälisessä lehdistössä 1906–1914 [The Country where maids had the vote. The Picture of Finnish working-class women's movement in international press 1906–1914]". In: Leena Laine and Pirjo Markkola (eds.): *Tuntematon työläisnainen [The unknown working-class woman]*. Tampere 1989, 162–185; Hinkkanen, Merja-Liisa and Maija Lintunen: "Aleksandra Gripenberg – taistelija ja kansainvälinen naisasianainen [Aleksandra Gripenberg – eine Kämpferin und internationale Frauenrechtlerin]". In: Markkola et al. 1997, as footnote 4, 193–212.

zenship that would give them a place among the nations.⁶ In Norway, the second European country ranking after Finland in terms of female suffrage, national-political independence also accelerated the extension of political rights to women.⁷ Great national transitions also constituted the background for the large clusters of suffrage reforms after the First and Second World Wars.⁸

The international perspective also reveals that women's suffrage was first adopted in young nations where democracy had rapidly grown while the old empires followed their example only after decades of struggle. Moreover, the general tendency of the old nations was the strong emphasis they placed upon the opposite natural essence of the genders and the linkage of this difference to the dichotomy of the public and private spheres of life. The arguments based on the natural essence of women were also used to motivate the exclusion of women from the political playgrounds, public by definition. On the contrary, during the emergence of the new nation, the gender difference or, more precisely, the importance of gender in relation to political rights, was put aside rather than visibly highlighted. It seems that external pressures, often felt to be oppressive, tended to unify the national front, making class and especially gender-related factors of disruption which were threatening the nation from within, fade away. Finland was among the young emerging nations that adopted women's suffrage with considerably more ease than the old nations with their established parliamentary traditions. Moreover, the national perspective and its tendency to blur the gender difference was probably more marked in Finland than in any other country with early women's suffrage. The political situation preceding the parliamentary reform was also excep-

⁶ See, for instance: Grimshaw, Patricia: *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*. Auckland 1987; Oldfield, Audrey: *Woman Suffrage in Australia. A Gift or a Struggle?* Cambridge 1992; Grimshaw, Patricia: "Reading the Silences. Suffrage Activists and Race in Nineteenth-Century Settler Societies". In: idem et al. 2001, as footnote 2, 31–48; Lake, Marilyn: "Between Old World and New: Feminist Citizenship, Nation and Race, the Destabilisation of Identity". In: Daley and Nolan 1994, as footnote 2, 277–294.

⁷ See, for instance: Blom, Ida: "Politics and Women in Politics in Norway since the End of the Nineteenth Century". In: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 12 (1987:1), 17–33; idem: "Modernity and the Norwegian Women's Movement from 1880's to 1914". In: Sylvia Paletschek (ed.): *Women's Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century: A European Perspective*. Stanford 2004, 125–151; Blom, Ida: "From Communal Family Rights to Individual Rights in Women's National Citizenship in Norway, 1888–1950". In: Grimshaw et al. 2001, as footnote 2, 184–198.

⁸ For chronological list see: Daley and Nolan 1994, as footnote 2, 349–352.

tionally sensitive due to the historical background of the country. Finland's separation from Sweden in 1809 and its annexation as an autonomous region to the Russian Empire had provided the administrative framework for the formation of an independent nation. As a consequence, the nationalist movement gained force throughout the 19th century. At the same time, however, the Pan-Slavist nationalistic movement was also growing in Russia, and consequently the Russian Empire took a firmer grip on the Finnish Grand Duchy. The opposing interests made the relationship increasingly tense, which, towards the turn of the century, led to public confrontations related to the interpretation of Finnish constitutional laws. This conflict was an important moment for the growth of political mobilisation. This mobilisation included the integral demand for extended suffrage and thus enhanced national sovereignty.⁹

However, there was no unanimity as to how extensive the suffrage reform was to be. Some of the representatives of the upper estates in the Parliament (called the *Diet*) tried to insist on privileges based on social status and gender, whilst others wanted to extend the suffrage to tax-paying men, and other groups started to support the idea of political equality for women who met the property criteria. All groups used the national interest argument, which was felt to be jeopardised in relation to Russia.

In Parliament, the idea of female suffrage was first introduced by four representatives of the bourgeois estate. In 1897 they submitted an application demanding the vote be granted to "all those women in our country that meet the conditions to benefit from the right to vote prescribed by our Constitution". Had the application been adopted, it would have extended political suffrage to the women who satisfied the property census criterion.¹⁰

Although the application did not lead to any proper action, it introduced the question of women's eligibility for citizenship into the Finnish public debate. It also activated the debate on the relationship between local (municipal) and state-level suffrage. Since

⁹ There is a lot of Finnish research on Finland's annexation to Russia and on the formation of separate nations as well as conflicts with Russia at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries. For publications in English refer to, for instance: Klinge, Matti: *Brief History of Finland*. Otava 1987; Paasivirta, Juhani: *Finland and Europe: International crises in the period of autonomy 1805–1914*. London 1981; Singleton, Fred: *A Short History of Finland*. Cambridge 1998.

¹⁰ Valtiopäivät 1897 [Parliament Documents 1897]: *Anomusehdotus no 3, Porvarissääty* [Petition Number 3, Burgher Estate].

independent (single and widowed) Finnish women had been granted the vote in the rural municipalities in 1865 and in towns and cities in 1873, it was appropriate to ask why they did not qualify for state-level citizenship under the same criteria. Where was the line between gender and public action? On the other hand, the application also raised the burning question of the relationship between gender and class. Should the circle of those with the vote be extended primarily to the employed male population or to the women of the upper classes who satisfied the property criteria? Through this debate, the Finnish politicians first sought to solve the question already being asked in most major European countries: how should modern citizenship criteria be defined in emerging national states?

The international opinions on female suffrage, based on liberal ideologies, were disseminated most visibly by the women's associations. Established in 1884, *Suomen Naisyhdistys* ("Women's Society of Finland") from early on had included the extension of women's political rights in its programme, with the same motivation and scope mentioned in the 1897 application. The figurehead of this society was Alexandra Gripenberg, who was to become one of the first Finnish female MPs and who was also active in the international women's movement.¹¹ However, she was conservative in her vision of society. This also applied to her stand on the contents of women's emancipation and social boundaries. In simplified terms, Gripenberg's line of thought could be described by the concept of "hierarchical sisterhood". In this pyramid-like structure, the women of different social classes had their own, strictly limited place, which defined female citizenship appropriate to their group. The sisterhood rhetoric was, however, applied to all women but in an overtly hierarchical manner. Only those belonging to the uppermost social strata were entitled to insist on their political rights, while the women of the working class and other lower social groups were to be happy with their lot and accept the advice and instructions given to them by their more enlightened sisters. This view fitted seamlessly with Gripenberg's ideology of nationality in which rights and obligations were also divided according to social class status.¹²

¹¹ Gripenberg, Aleksandra: *Finsk Kvinnoforeningen 1884–1909*. Helsingfors 1909; Jallinoja, Riitta: *Suomalaisen naisasialiikkeen taistelukaudet [Periods of struggle in Finnish women's movement]*. Porvoo 1983; Hinkkanen and Lintunen 1997, as footnote 5.

¹² Sulkunen, Irma: "Naisten järjestäytyminen ja kaksijakoinen kansalaisuus [Women's organization and the gendered citizenship]". In: Risto Alapuro et al. (eds.): *Kansa liikkeessä [People in movement]*. Vaasa 1987, 159–172.

A more liberal political line was represented by *Unioni Naisasialiitto* (current English name *Unioni*, the “League of Finnish Feminists”), which branched off from “Women’s Society of Finland” in 1893. However, their views about female suffrage and the hierarchical structure of sisterhood were the same in principle. It is indicative of the notion of the women represented by this organisation that its major opinion-maker, and also one of the first MPs, Lucina Hagman organised *Marttaliitto* (“The Martha Organisation”), a household-oriented organisation which became very popular, to work in parallel with *Unioni*. The educational work of the organisation was primarily targeted at women of the lower social classes. The focus of this work was on civic education that constructed female identity strongly around middle-class maternity values (*maternal feminism*). In national politics, the founding of the “Martha Organisation” was, in turn, motivated by the effort to strengthen the front of enlightened Finnish women against the Russian threat.¹³

The demand for the women’s vote, represented by women’s societies and certain bourgeois groups under estate and property criteria, remained a fairly peripheral issue in Finland. In the context of the suffrage movement, the demand was, however, one important thread but it never gained any considerable support due to the fact that it was attached to the interests of the upper-class women who were few in number. The suffrage question became more acute, and was finally solved in Finland through another channel; not as a separate objective of the women, but as an extensive parliamentary reform that applied to both genders alike.

Suffrage and political mobilisation

A strong reform-oriented civic movement started in Finland towards the end of the 19th century. It was underpinned, on the one hand, by changes in the production structures and also by the social problems caused by rapid population growth. On the other, by the movements closely linked to national aspirations, especially the effort to strengthen the moral stamina of the nation, that were at that time forming its identity. The third

¹³ von Alfthan, Märtha: *Seitsemän vuosikymmentä Naisasialiitto Unionin historiaa [Seven decades history of Unioni, the League of Finnish Feminists]*. Joensuu 1966; Ollila, Anne: *Suomen kotien päivä valkenee... Marttajärjestö suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa vuoteen 1939 [The day of Finland’s homes is dawning... The Martha Organization in Finnish society until 1939]*. Helsinki 1993.

propelling force was the formation of a modern civic society through voluntary and individual action, which was yet geared to collective changes. The aim was to extend the political space and take it under democratic control. This movement in Finland reached its peak in the early 20th century as Russia tightened its grip on the Grand Duchy, launching a strong wave of patriotic expression. At the same time, political mobilisation, which was driven by social problems, intensified amongst all strata of the population. Besides the restitution of legality, the main objective of the extra-parliamentary movements was crystallised in the need to reform the suffrage conditions radically, and thereby to thoroughly reformulate political power.¹⁴

Although the political mobilisation which, channelled into the civic organisations, did assume original features in Finland due to the country's political situation, the phenomenon was by itself common to many other countries during the peak moments of socio-political change. It was specifically the reformist organisations that led to the propagation and adoption of the new civic ideas, and also acted as the channel for those with no vote to present their demands. Therefore, the mode of political mobilisation and the collectively set objectives tell us something essential about the social, linguistic, ethnic and gender-based criteria used to define the membership of a nation in various social and political environments. Through the nature and content of this political mobilisation, we can also approach the question of how parliamentary and cultural features defined not only the forms of organisation but also the limits set for citizenship.

The Finnish suffrage situation had deteriorated seriously throughout the 19th century, ending in a crisis in the early 20th century as a consequence of the political state of emergency. The extremely antiquated nature of the parliamentary system crystallised the problems. Whilst many European countries had already adopted the bicameral system and the representative rights had also otherwise been considerably extended, the Finnish Parliament still convened in the 19th century based on the traditional four-estate division. This meant that political power was strongly in the hands of the upper estates even though their relative share of the population kept diminishing. Illustrative of the disproportional situation is that in the early 20th century merely less than 10 per-

¹⁴ Alapuro et al. 1987, as footnote 12.

cent of Finns had the right to vote. Therefore, not only women, but also men left outside estate representation, were without political rights.¹⁵

Due to the antiquated features of the parliamentary system, the nature of the suffrage movement was different in Finland, compared to other Western countries. The major divide was still one of class but not in the modern sense: the line was roughly drawn between those entitled to citizenship and those without the vote. People without the vote, for their part, were divided into subordinate urban and rural commoners on the one hand, and those of the upper estates with no vote, on the other. Thus, the people without the vote did not constitute a unified coalition but represented all strata of the societal hierarchy, both socially and ideologically. The heterogeneity was clearly illustrated by the diverse objectives used by those groups with no vote to define the criteria of citizenship for the nation about to emerge. Two good examples of this are the demand of the women's movement to go beyond the gender border within the limits of property criteria, and the demand to extend the male vote, as advocated by liberals.

Since, however, the absolute majority of non-enfranchised people comprised of urban and rural workers who were excluded from the vote by all property and estate criteria, the leading position in the formulation of the suffrage programme was rapidly assumed by the labour movement, which drew its support from these groups. As early as 1893, the workers party included the issue of suffrage as a radical extension of their agenda. In 1899 the focus of the programme sharpened into demand for the universal and equal right to vote for both genders. This demand was also transferred into the programme adopted in 1903 by the party that at this time assumed a socialist stance. The suffrage demand was a direct copy of the German Social Democratic Party's programme, but elsewhere in Europe, the socialist movement was also advocating the full implementation of political democracy.¹⁶

¹⁵ Tuominen, Uuno: *Säätyedustuslaitos 1880-luvun alusta vuoteen 1906 [The Diet from 1880 until 1906 in the history of Finland's parliament]*. Helsinki 1964 (= Suomen kansanedustuslaitoksen historia [History of Finnish Parliamentarism]; 3); Mylly, Juhani: *Edustuksellisen kansanvallan läpimurto [The breakthrough of representative democracy in Finland's Parliament 100 years]*. Helsinki 2006 (= Suomen eduskunta 100 vuotta [100 years of Finnish Parliament]; 1), 14–46; Koskinen, Pirkko K.: “Äänioikeuden lainsäädäntöhistoriaa [Legislation history of the franchise]”. In: Markkola et al. 1997, as footnote 4, 26–32.

¹⁶ Ensimmäisen työväenyhdistyksen edustajain kokouksen pöytäkirja 18.–20.9.1893; Toisen työväenyhdistysten edustajain kokouksen pöytäkirja 9.–11.9.1896; Kolmannen yleisen Suomen työväenyhdistysten edustajain kokouksen pöytäkirja 17.–20.7.1899 [Minutes held

Although the Finnish labour party with its suffrage programme joined the international socialist movement, the nature of the party and its organisational links were particular to Finland. Due to the country's markedly agrarian background, the majority of the working class were landless rural people, which in turn were reflected in the membership, modes of operations and ideological interpretation of the Social Democratic Party. Among other features, the labour movement was characterised by religion-oriented concepts and, on an organisational level, by a close link to the temperance movement. The temperance movement, in turn, was the strongest civic organisation in the country in terms of popular support, and it recruited its members mainly from among the workers, although it was organised and led by upper nationalist circles. In the early years of the 20th century, the temperance movement also included the demand for universal and equal suffrage among its objectives. Due to the shared popular support base and objectives, the movements drew towards each other and occasionally also merged into each other in the early 20th century.¹⁷

Moreover, it was typical of the Finnish temperance movement that both genders were equally represented among the members. Women of various popular groups accounted for such an important proportion of the temperance society members that this movement can be considered the country's most potent women's movement at the turn of the 20th century. Women were also active participants in the labour movement and other civic organisations although their proportion was not as high as it was in the temperance movement. It was these alliances specifically that played a decisive role in the suffrage struggle.¹⁸

On the one hand, the integrated joint action of men and women within the suffrage movement boosted the power of radical demand, speeding up the implementation of suffrage reform. On the other hand, this type of pressure, with no underlined gender distinction, which was associated with massive popular meetings and demonstrations, pushed into the background the women's vote as a separate demand. It was in the rhetoric of Hilja Pärssinen, who was well-read in work of the German socialist theo-

in meetings of the workers' association's representatives; 1st meeting 18th–20th September 1893, 2nd meeting 9th–11th September 1896, 3rd meeting 17th–20th July 1899]; Soikkanen, Hannu: *Sosialismin tulo Suomeen [The arrival of socialism to Finland]*. Turku 1961.

¹⁷ Sulkunen, Irma: *History of the Finnish Temperance Movement. Temperance as a Civic Religion*. Lewiston / Queenstone 1990, passim.

¹⁸ Idem 1987, as footnote 12.

rists, that the suffrage programme of the members of the women's movement became markedly a class objective supporting the hegemony of the upper classes. Consequently the women fighting for the common interest of the working classes did their best to keep away from it. This view was also shared by the other visible leader of women workers, Miina Sillanpää, whose political ideology was formulated in the suffrage struggle of the early 20th century. During this period, she also stood out as the visible and fearless speaker for female servants who were suppressed under patriarchal patronage and as the force that brought them close to the ideas of the emerging labour movement.¹⁹

The transfer of political mobilisation into the organisations of the lower social groups, and therefore into the strengthened demand for universal and equal suffrage formulated by the labour movement, forced the gender-based suffrage programme of the non-socialist women's movement into a tight spot. Likewise, its efforts to build up a unified female front to solve the suffrage question were doomed. This became apparent in December 1904 as the exponents of the middle-class women's movement tried to bring various women's groups together to support a joint suffrage programme in line with the international suffrage meeting that had been held in Berlin earlier that year. The meeting was in chaos when the advocates of universal and equal suffrage violently clashed with the suffrage programme based on social inequality advocated by the middle-class women's movement. As a consequence of this meeting, the rift between the middle-class and the Social Democratic suffrage movements became deeper and could never again be bridged. After the radical turn in the suffrage question in late 1905, the middle-class women's organisations had to work hard to shake off the political shadow cast by the suffrage standpoint that treated women from a socially hierarchic perspective.²⁰

¹⁹ Idem: *Naisen kutsumus. Miina Sillanpää ja sukupuolten maailmojen erkaantuminen [A woman's calling. Miina Sillanpää and the separation of genders]*. Juva 1989; Hentilä 1989, as footnote 5.

²⁰ Kansallisarkisto Helsinki [National Archives Helsinki]: Unioni Naisasialiitto Suomessa ry:n arkisto [Archives of the Feminist Association Unioni], Folder 33: "Naisten yleinen äänioikeuskokous Helsingissä 7.11.1904 [Leaflet: The general meeting of women's vote in Helsinki 7th November 1904]"; in the same holdings see also e.g. "Kehotus Suomen naisille [Appeal to the Finnish women]", 14th November 1905; lentolehtinen: "Arvoisa kansalainen [leaflet Dear Citizen]", "Avoin kirje Unionin äänioikeuskomitealta [Open Letter from the union's suffrage committee]", 15th November 1905.

Although the Finnish political atmosphere remained extremely agitated as a result of many social evils and the Russian oppression of Finland throughout the early 20th century, the suffrage reform based on the equality of genders and classes was adopted during the 1905 turmoil with surprising ease in the end. The rapidly reached favourable outcome indicates both the rapid demise of Russian imperial power and the Finnish willingness to exploit the window of opportunity opened by the period of instability in a surprisingly unanimous manner.

Events started rolling after the unsuccessful Russian war with Japan, in the aftermath of which the country was swept by revolutionary rising. The mobilisation reached its peak in the extensive strike that flared up in late October 1905. The strike that had brought factories and traffic to a standstill spread to Finland in late October and early November, igniting a strong, nation-wide wave of demonstrations. The Finnish demands were crystallised in two objectives: restitution of national sovereignty and the adoption of universal and equal suffrage. The political threat associated with the demonstrations was illustrated by the fact that in order to pacify the situation, the Tsar issued a manifesto on the fourth day of the strike, promising to return the autonomous rights of Finland and to approve the country's parliamentary reform based on universal and equal suffrage. Apart from minor discordant notes, the general interpretation in Finland was that the promise also included women's right to vote and stand as candidates in elections. The reform was rapidly prepared and Tsar Nicolas II adopted it without any objections in May the following year.²¹

It is interesting and exceptional in view of the corresponding situation internationally, that during the debate on the reform of Parliament, the only opposition to women's right to vote was expressed by the liberal politicians. The majority of them were among the politically over-represented Swedish speaking population who were in fact a small minority of the overall Finnish population. The most fervent opponent of women's right to vote was Professor Robert Hermansson, who claimed that women's natural essence would be corrupted by public political action; that this was the generally held view in Western society and that Finland, as a young nation in Europe, should not deviate from this accepted view. In certain opinions there was also the fear of a

²¹ See, for instance: Jussila, Osmo: *Nationalismi ja vallankumous venäläis-suomalaisissa suhteissa 1899–1914 [Nationalism and revolution in Russian-Finnish relationships 1899–1914]*. Helsinki 1979; Mylly 2006, as footnote 15, 93–102.

strong radicalisation of the parliamentary system if women were to vote and stand as candidates in elections.²²

However, the opposing view remained among the minority, as the labouring classes exercised extra-parliamentary pressure from the outside and the majority of the peasants and clergy were for the inclusion of women in the scope of universal and equal suffrage. It was almost unanimously stated that if men qualified for national citizenship, why then should not also their mothers, wives and daughters? Equally unanimously it was also pointed out that women had demonstrated the required competency through their everyday work and educational contribution, general social significance and active participation in the action for democratic rights.²³

Cultural background of the female suffrage

As shown by the opinions expressed in connection with parliamentary reform, the confusion of Russian foreign and domestic policies is not a sufficient or direct explanation for the extension of the scope of universal and equal suffrage to encompass women in Finland. For example, in Russia, where the new national parliamentary institution, the *Duma*, came into being as a result of the strike, women's suffrage did not appear anywhere on the agenda. Neither in other European countries did women, despite their efforts, obtain the vote, let alone the right to stand as a candidate for election. So the question remains why Finnish women obtained the vote with such minor opposition. And why was it so smooth and natural for them to step over the line of demarcation of public policy which had become an almost insurmountable obstacle for the women of more established nations?

When we look for reasons we cannot limit ourselves to the interpretations that emphasise the specificity of women. Indeed, it is important to note that the liberal equality argument normally underpinning the middle-class women's movement did not easily

²² Eduskunnan arkisto Helsinki, Eduskuntaudistuskomitean memoriaalipöytäkirjat ja memoriaalipöytäkirjojen konseptit 12.12.1905–13.12.1905 (kopiosarja); Eduskuntaudistuskomitean mietintö 1906. [Archive of Parliament, Helsinki, Committee for parliamentary reform, memoranda and draft memoranda 12.12.1905–13.12.1905 (duplicate copies), memorandum by the Committee for parliamentary reform 1906.].

²³ Eduskunnan arkisto Helsinki, Eduskuntaudistuskomitean asiakirjat (kopiosarja) [Archive of Parliament, Helsinki, Documents of the Committee for parliamentary reform (duplicate copies)]; Valtiopäivät 1905–1906 [Parliament sessions 1905–1906, verbatim minutes].

apply in Finland. It wasn't relevant to argue with reference to women's high standard of education, their active participation in various tasks and social activities or to the economic independence of self-employed professionals, because literacy was not limited to upper classes but was a commonly held capacity among other social classes irrespective of gender. Likewise, women participated actively in work and social activities irrespective of social demarcations, and here the lower strata were pioneers rather than followers. Emphasising the special merits of women does not suffice to explain the joint gender collaboration which constituted the basis of the radical outcome.²⁴

Indeed, it seems evident that the ease of the non-gendered joint action was based on models of thought and operation deeply rooted in a common cultural background. This activated a political mobilisation that promoted modern forms of civic organisation. For their part, these models were also an expression of how women's social roles, status and identity were traditionally defined in Finland. If we continue to observe the phenomenon from the perspective of civic associations, our attention is drawn to the forms of organisation that preceded the political breakthrough, and especially to the long Finnish tradition of non-gendered social movements. As early as the 18th century, women were not only active participants in the religious revivalist movements, but also their organisers and leaders. The important role they played in the local religious field continued throughout the 19th century, and narrow threads of that role persisted here and there even beyond that.

The revivalist movements are important in view of later developments because they considerably eroded the traditional social order, providing the mental and social conditions for the emergence of modern civic society. In the realm of personal revival, the ideological legitimacy of the old Estate System was faced with the first eroding blows as the individual religious solutions started to break the ideological hegemony closely associated with the state church system. The fact that women were active participants, even spearheading the social change in the form of religious revivalism, tells a convincing story of their strong status in local Finnish communities. It also tells about the blurredness of gender-based public and private spheres, suggesting that the traditional Finnish agrarian culture was not even aware of such a notion. Indeed, it seems that the self-evident character of women's social participation, evidenced in the revivalist

²⁴ See, for instance, articles in: Manninen and Setälä 1990, as footnote 1.

movements, was also transferred to the civic associations organised in the 19th century, and thence to the suffrage movement that mobilised, in the early 20th century, to demand universal and equal citizenship.²⁵

On the other hand, we must remember that there were also revivalist movements recruiting women in other protestant countries, but they did not necessarily lead to the corresponding formation of a tradition of non-gendered public activity. This shows the varied ways in which religion was transmitted to political structures, the conceptions of the world, and everyday life in different countries, nations and social classes. It also suggests that the activeness of the women's revivalist movement must have been underpinned by factors rooted in the local culture which enabled the women to act publicly and take a visible leading role in the movements. This set of problems is undeniably multifaceted.

A further thread of interpretation, which I want to highlight, is the strong agrarian tradition in Finland, along with the associated survival strategies and cognitive ways of analysing the world.

In international comparison, it is rare to find a population structure as homogenous as Finland used to be, with relatively small differences in the wealth of different social groups. Nobility accounted for a very small proportion of the population, as did the wealthy upper classes. Most Finns lived through farming, mostly on very small farms. Their subsistence was often very limited, and survival called for smooth co-operation between both genders. The fact that it was self-evident for women to participate equally in hard work, not only in the house but also in animal husbandry and farming, side by side with the men, was directly reflected in both the agrarian gender system and the blurred line of demarcation between the private and public spheres.

This tradition was still active and alive in the peak years of political mobilisation in the early 20th century, with about 90 percent of the Finnish population still living in the countryside. Most factory workers also had their roots in the country, and by international standards, women also accounted for an exceptionally large share of this population. This meant that, like the peasant families, the survival strategy of worker families also effectively obscured eventual gender strategies. At the same time, it formulated a

²⁵ Sulkunen, Irma: *Liisa Eerikintytär ja hurmosliikkeet 1700-1800-luvulla [Lisa Erik's daughter and ecstatic movements in 18th and 19th centuries]*. Helsinki 1999.

gender system based on equal partnership including, on the one side, the strong role of women in the household and, on the other, their natural passage to public civic activity. There is thus a considerable difference between Finland and the old national states and their inherent civic societies with gendered citizenship notions. The difference in social/civic gender, something seen as a true essence for men and women, and generally associated with the dichotomy of the public and private spheres of life in those countries, was only just emerging in Finland in the early 20th century. It is illustrative in this sense that apart from two or three parliamentarians representing the upper classes, the essential argument was never raised in the parliamentary progression towards female suffrage.²⁶

Parliamentary reform and gendered citizenship

The particular nature of Finnish parliamentary reform also played an important role in view of the parliamentary actions of women. From the very beginning, they made full use of the rights given to them, marking out through their own actions the lines of their political citizenship. The situation was completely opposite, for example, to that of Britain and the United States, where women had to use the suffrage struggle to break the gender categories that were already embedded in civic society structures in line with the public-private dichotomy.

Interestingly enough, irrespective of their diverse points of departure, Finnish women were advocating in their actual parliamentary work mostly issues belonging to the “feminine sphere” as defined by the more established civic society. Right from the start, the questions relating to the situation of women and children, maternity care and insurance, as well as household issues, inspired the most frequent initiatives and most fervent speeches by the female MPs in the new, democratic Parliament. Later, as the efforts to build a welfare state grew stronger, women’s political activity extended to encompass healthcare, schooling issues and housing policy.

When looking at the parliamentary activity of women, our attention is also drawn to the fact that both the middle-class and Social Democratic female MPs raised the same social problem issues, although their premises and proposed solutions might have been different. The most crucial difference was about the role of the state in securing the

²⁶ On the elaborating of this interpretation see also the studies mentioned in footnote 1.

social and legal status of women and children. In line with their ideology, the women in the middle-class groups preferred voluntary forms of assistance funded by the state. The Social Democrats, in turn, advocated a clear and direct state responsibility for all issues relating to women's and children's welfare and just treatment. The ideological demarcation remained therefore clearly drawn in parliamentary work. And cooperation between socialist and middle-class women in major parties was not seen before the 1930s when a gender system based on the notion of dual citizenship also started to penetrate the Finnish nation-state and civic society. However, for the most part, loyalty to the party prevailed over gender solidarity.²⁷

²⁷ Lähteenmäki, Maria: *Mahdollisuuksien aika: työläisnaiset ja yhteiskunnan muutos 1910-30-luvun Suomessa [The era of possibilities: Working class women and societal change in Finland 1910–1930]*. Helsinki 1995.