A LONG TRADITION OF EQUALITY: WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN FINLAND

Aura Korppi-Tommola

Special Circumstances in the Shadow of Imperial Russia

Finnish women gained suffrage and the right to stand for elections very early, in 1906. Finland had been an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire since 1809, and was governed according to its old Swedish constitution. Dating from the late 18th century, this was an enlightened constitution, which, although it granted relatively strong powers to the crown, also gave legislative power to the Diet of four estates. About 15 percent of the population was represented in the estate of the Nobility, or had the right to vote, in the Diet elections, for candidates of other estates. These other estates, or houses of the diet, were the Burgess, representing tax-paying burghers in the towns; the Clergy, representing the Lutheran Church and the Helsinki University; and the Peasants, representing rural landowners. Thus, the growing population in cities had no way of influencing politics. The country was very agrarian indeed, with about 90 percent of the population living in the countryside. This state of affairs lasted until 1906, when the estate-based system of representation was abolished and universal suffrage was granted.

The language of administration and the upper classes in Finland was Swedish, but the majority of Finns spoke Finnish. The most important political question during the late 19th century, then, was about the use of the Finnish language; the first political parties were founded around the language question in the 1870s. The Swedish party was liberal on many issues, while the Finnish party soon split between conservative ‘Old Finns’ and more liberal ‘Young Finns’. In the diet, the language question eclipsed...
other issues to the extent that many members of the estates, who in general were against women's liberation, voted for emancipation legislation if it happened to favor their own language group. For instance, Swedish-party members voted for schools for girls in Swedish-speaking areas and opposed them in Finnish-speaking towns. The Social Democratic Party was founded at the turn of the century with a very radical and revolutionary program, but it had no influence within the estates.

Around the end of the 19th century, the Russian government started to standardize legislation in different parts of its empire in order to centralize administration, opening the era known as the 'Russian oppression' (1899–1905). Finns considered this to be an attack on their status as an autonomous grand duchy, a status that they started to fight for by founding an underground movement. In this fight, gender lines were blurred. Women and men worked together giving shelter for men hiding from the authorities, and smuggling and distributing illegal newspapers. Women behaved in a way that previously would not have been considered decent for ladies. The trade-union movement, which was fighting for better working conditions and universal suffrage, the temperance movement, and women's movements, which were working at the time on a wide range of economic, political, and educational freedoms for women, all gave cover to the fight against Russian oppression.

The era of oppression came to an end in 1905, when the Russian emperor faced trouble after losing the war with Japan, and workers, including Finnish workers, went on strike. Both the women’s and the labor movements orchestrated mass demonstrations at this time. Finally, in 1906, these movements succeeded in gaining universal suffrage for men and women. The emperor had to call the Russian parliament, the Duma, into session, but the socialist revolution there was postponed for over a decade. However, civic rights were never on very solid ground for Finns under Czarist Russian rule, which only came to an end in December 1917 when Finland declared independence. The era of independence began with a bloody civil war between socialists and the winning ‘white’ bourgeois forces in the spring of 1918.

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4 Workers’ associations in different parts of the country united their forces, founding the Social-Democratic Party, which demanded wide social reforms including universal suffrage in local and national elections.