

## 14. TORONTO 1909: SUFFRAGE VERSUS PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION

The one area where women's enfranchisement was not likely to be decisive, according to Catt, was altering men's - and women's - basic attitudes.

Robert Booth Fowler on Carrie Chapman Catt, 1986

An International Council of Women congress was arranged in Toronto, Canada, involving two weeks of activities during the summer of 1909.<sup>1</sup> At the congress, there was little interest for the night work prohibition and its consequences. And the organization was still not ready to demand political equality, but it could not any longer ignore suffrage totally.

ICW must have felt a pressure to form a committee on suffrage when IWSA was founded and became active. The American priest and suffragist Anna Howard Shaw became the head of the committee. But still in Toronto the public meeting on "Suffrage and Rights on Citizenship" was held separately from the congress and days before it.<sup>2</sup> During the five years since the congress in Berlin, the opinion had changed. Suffrage for women had become central for large parts of the women's movement in countries in Western Europe and the theme was engaging more and more proponents. The strategy, not the question as such, was still debated among the suffragist. What to demand? Should the demand be suffrage for women on the same conditions as men, even if it was bound to income or wealth? Or should the demand be general suffrage for all, as demanded by some socialists? ICW stayed neutral.

The suffrage meeting in Toronto reformulated the demand for women's suffrage meekly. Several speakers put up reasons for woman suffrage founded

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<sup>1</sup> The Quinquennial Meetings of the International Council of Women, 16 – 22 June, and Quinquennial Congress, 24 – 30 June 1909. *Agenda for the Quinquennial Sessions of the International Council of Women to be held at Toronto, Canada, June, 1909*. Aberdeen: the Rosemount Press, 1909. The congress was arranged by the National Council of Canada. *4th quinquennial meeting, Toronto, Canada, June 1909*, edited by the Countess of Aberdeen, President. London: Constable & Co, Ltd, 1910:37,40ff, Later = ICW Toronto 1909; *Report of the International Congress of Women held in Toronto, Canada, June 24<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, 1909, under the auspices of the National council of women of Canada*. Toronto: Geo Parker & Sons, 1910, later = Toronto 1909; *Our Lady of the Sunshine and Her International Visitors of 1909*. 1909; *Who's who at the congress. International Council of Women, Toronto, June 1909*, u å .

<sup>2</sup> The congress started the 24th of June 1909. The suffrage meeting was held the 21st of June 1909, at 8 l'clock in the evening. Others meetings were held on Peace and Public Health. *Englishwoman's Review*, Oct. 15th, 1909; ICW Toronto 1909:30, 199; 1904 Anna Howard Show had been elected president for the American woman suffrage movement NAWSA, which was in a deplorable period. Linkugel and Solomon 1991:62.

on women's difference and special mission in society, among them Mrs O C Edwards, Canada and most importantly the president of the ICW Ishbel Aberdeen and the secretary of the Council, Dr Alice Salomon, from Germany.<sup>3</sup>

It is of interest to see how Alice Salomon looked upon the movement she was deeply involved in. She had made her view on night work prohibition for women clear at earlier congresses. Salomon distinguished one equality group and one Eigenart/peculiarity group among suffragists. The first group, the equality group "look upon our movement as a fight against wrongs inflicted on women by men" and to "them the disqualification of the female sex is rather due to circumstances, to differences in education carried on through centuries, to suppression...". Alice Salomon counted herself to the second group, which "believe in the difference of capacities and gifts of men and women". These two groups had different arguments for woman suffrage. The first one grounded their demands in "the idea of acquiring equal rights in every department of life" ... and wanted to achieve "equality". The second group wanted to add to society "the production of unique and new powers for public life that can never be given by men ..."

Alice Salomon said that the first group was deteriorating. She also warned for looking at suffrage as a goal in itself; women had to make the society better with their special "capacities".

... we must not forget that the exercise of the suffrage is not an end - only a means, one of the means of developing our strength, our capacity, a means of making women more self-dependent, of making their lives more valuable and influential and powerful; one of the means of creating a feeling of responsibility, and that complete sense of citizenship which makes our individual strength and capacity subservient to the welfare of the community.

For the second group harmony, balance and complementary were important. They refused to complain over "...wrong inflicted on women by men" and did not mention "suppression" according to Salomon.<sup>4</sup>

The second group, accentuating women's difference, could formulate more offensive arguments in defense of woman suffrage than the equality group could. From the view of women as different, the group could promise that the society as a whole should benefit enormously if women got the vote and influence in

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<sup>3</sup> For example ICW Toronto 1909:219.

<sup>4</sup> ICW Toronto 1909:212f.

politics. The equality group could offer nothing as revolutionary. The arguments of that group was disregarded as wanting benefits for women, giving preference to their personal sense of justice. Arguments emphasizing women's difference pointed to women's responsibility and possibility to make the whole nation better. They were not demanding justice for themselves; they looked for the best of all humankind. And the very best of it all was, that despite these fantastic promises of what women's motherly character should give to The Whole, personal relations between men and women were not at all to be changed. They were already as they ought to be. Together but different for the best of the nation, in complementary harmony, women and men were to live and work in the future.

The accent on peculiarity/Eigenart made it at the same time logic to demand suffrage for women and support the prevailing gender division of labor or to deepen it. Women's mission was firstly in the family, secondly in a motherly engagement in society. The sex segregated labor market, the renewal of a construction of a gender division of labor via industrialism, became in the perspective of women's difference, something to develop further.

In Toronto, debates of women and industrial work were not in the forefront. If some odd disagreements on special legislation crept up, the voices for such legislation were overwhelming. There was on the other hand a general agreement about allowing women to work for wages, married or unmarried.<sup>5</sup>

Four women defended a night work prohibition for women. One of them wanted to expand the Berne Convention of 1906 into work in shops and to home industrial work. A proposal was presented of a mother's insurance to allow women to stay at home with small children. It could be connected to an illness insurance. What time such an insurance should cover was not mentioned. One woman from Australia had seen a change in men's attitudes, in so far as "men seek the protection of the law because they believe their unions to be unable to afford them the protection they desire". Was this a new male strategy? Alas, the protocol has nothing more to add and maybe this was only an odd remark. Someone else put her hope in suffrage. It should give women power over their work conditions.

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<sup>5</sup> Toronto 1909 Vol 1:117, Vol 2:85, 98-113.

Three demands were often raised together: a minimum wage, factory inspection and a night work prohibition for women. A criticism of that prohibition was dismissed, and not for the first time, with the argument that the number of women in industrial work was increasing.<sup>6</sup> As an argument, it did not deal with the gender division of labor.

Few contributions showed any aversion to special legislation. One such view was read out by Dutch Wilhelmina Drucker; it feared that special laws should have the effect to exclude women totally from industrial work. That was a fear behind the compromise done by German Social Democratic women, who had accepted a night work prohibition to hinder a legislation to totally forbid women in factories, thus their right to work for wages.

So different future perspectives and fears had women, at a time with many changes in production and technology. No one could look into the future. The Swedish Axianne Thorstenson was equally pessimistic, when she pointed out, that women workers in Sweden were afraid to lose their works because the protective legislation made a night's rest of eleven hours obligatory.<sup>7</sup>

But worker protection for women was not the topic of any integrated debate in Toronto. The question of suffrage was much more on the agenda of the day and also more controversial. ICW dealt with it by promises of women's sacrifices for the nation. Woman suffrage should pave the way for a better society without being a threat to the hierarchical order of that society. It was a paradox but not perceived as such.

Woman suffrage was imagined not to change contemporary views on femininity and masculinity, and especially not to change the gender division of labor. Women "...the bearers and rearers of children..."<sup>8</sup> would go on being that also with the right to vote. If they did work for wages, their capacity for caring should be developed in the work they did and special rules and laws ought to support them. In this lay hidden a promise not to compete with men, not even in politics. Advocates of equality were perceived as in direct confrontation with men, as competitors to men. They claimed all the privileges that had been

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<sup>6</sup> "the cause of individual freedom"(109) Toronto Vol 1 1909:8f, 104ff, 450ff (quote 451); Toronto 1909 Vol 2:93ff.

<sup>7</sup> Dr Kleerekoper (read by Drucker) "Recent Labour Legislation in Holland". "if special protection of women in factories and workshops does not mean ultimate exclusion of women altogether"(97), Axianne Thorstenson's contribution got a short summary. Chrystal MacMillan from Scotland, wanted to differ protection from restriction, liked the first but did not like the second. Toronto 1909 Vol 2:95ff.

<sup>8</sup> Toronto 1909 Vol 2:107.

reserved for men. They threatened the gender hierarchy and the harmony between the sexes. It is not strange that the woman suffrage movement tactically leaned more and more towards arguments of difference. At short sight it was advantageous and it gave many new followers.

A feminist like Wilhelmina Drucker saw how the labor market often in practical situations left out married women. And she had no hopes for a better situation after a suffrage reform. Her guess was that women then should be part of restrictions concerning women in the labor market. If that was the future, she herself should have to accept it, which she did not want. The radical Dutch feminist anticipated that suffrage for women should not do away with special legislation for women in the labor market:

There is a great difference between being protected and protecting ourselves, being restricted and restricting ourselves. 'In truth the prison unto which we doom Ourselves, no prison is'.<sup>9</sup>

She sounded resigned, foreseeing that women were to put themselves into a "prison".

The bourgeois women's movement followed in the footsteps of bourgeois men. They accepted their analysis and decisions. Also the Social Democratic women had followed in the footsteps of their male comrades and their views on women and waged work since the 1890s. This does not mean that all women had put a stop to their resistance to the most prevalent views of their time. Opposing voices could even be heard among so called bourgeois feminists. And some pure feminists existed still. And the feminists among the socialists had not been silenced. They could even be heard at public socialist meetings and congresses. This would be obvious at the Second International meeting in Copenhagen the year after the congress in Toronto, in the summer of 1910.

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<sup>9</sup> Toronto 1909 Vol 2:97.