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**A Model Country or a Peripheral Anomaly?  
Finnish Women's Suffrage and Female Members of Parliament  
in Transnational Debates, 1906–1919**

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The introduction of women's suffrage in 1906 and the election of the first female members to parliament made Finland an object of international attention. Contemporary cross-national comparisons were common, and there was a tendency to compete with and evaluate each other. In Finland, many women activists and some male politicians, too, felt that they had to prove women's political competence and hence actively communicated the experiences of women's suffrage struggle internationally. Abroad, comparisons were exploited either to support women's suffrage or to demonstrate its evil consequences, depending on party affiliation. The Finnish example encouraged suffragists in France, the Netherlands and Sweden, and women's political activity was related by the German labour press. However, due to its lack of national sovereignty, Finland was no credible political model for many observers. Opponents of women's suffrage questioned the ability of women to improve politics and suspected that women MPs would put male liberties to an end. Whatever the conclusions, the experiences of the pioneering countries could not be ignored whenever women's political citizenship was debated.

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The introduction of women's suffrage as an element of the Finnish parliamentary reform in 1906 and the election of 19 female Members of Parliaments in 1907 amazed parliamentarians and suffragists in the Western world: a periphery of Western civilization and a Grand Duchy belonging to the autocratic Russian Empire had awarded women full political rights when no major »civilized« nation had yet done so. Moreover, numerous female MPs were elected in later Finnish parliamentary elections thanks to parties placing them high on the candidate lists in order to motivate women voters and the activism of female organizations in the election campaigns. Over 60 per cent of Finnish women went to the polls in 1907. The Social Democrats won 80 out of 200 seats in this election,<sup>1</sup> which made them in relative terms the largest socialist party in any parliament and consequently a source of inspiration for socialists elsewhere. The suffragists typically saw the Finnish reform as an important step in the common struggle across national borders for women's emancipation.

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<sup>1</sup> J. MYLLY, *Edustuksellisen kansanvallan läpimurto*, 2006.

Finland succeeded in reforming its representative institution in conjunction with the Russian Revolution of 1905 and related unrest, replacing a pre-modern four-estate diet inherited from Sweden with a unicameral parliament based on exceptionally broad suffrage. The goals of the introduction of women's suffrage were nationalistic in at least two ways: on the one hand, the reform doubled the size of the politically active nation within the vast Russian Empire. On the other, women's suffrage distinguished Finland from Russia as a more progressive, inherently Western, constitutional polity and sent this message also to the Western world, on the goodwill of which Finnish defences of autonomy counted.<sup>2</sup> Before the reform, only approximately 10 per cent of the male population had been entitled to vote. After the reform, nearly half of the members of parliament represented lower classes. Even after the reform, however, Finland still did not have a parliamentary polity, sovereignty remaining with the Czar until independence in late 1917.<sup>3</sup> Nor did Finland have male universal suffrage at the local level until 1917/18. Russification measures challenging the Swedish constitution of the country were soon reintroduced. Thus Finland did not constitute a sovereign nation recognized as a credible political model and remained, with its female MPs, an anomaly. In this chapter, we revisit the »anomalies« of women's suffrage in Finland by placing them in the international and transnational contexts of the two first decades of the twentieth century. In previous research, the Finnish suffrage reform has mainly been explored from the perspective of the national narrative and subsumed into the democratization of the vote for both male and female citizens.<sup>4</sup> Some comparative research on the »pioneering« nations has also been carried out, but typically their national experiences have been discussed separately.<sup>5</sup> Irma Sulkunen has examined Finland vis-à-vis New Zealand and Australia, concluding that women's suffrage was first introduced in small and young polities in which women's significant contributions to mainly agricultural production led to a gender system different from that of more developed economies with a strong middle class, where the conceptions of femininity and masculinity were more differentiated and where motherhood was used as an argument to confine women to the private sphere.<sup>6</sup>

A comparative reading of previous research shows how the interpretations of the Finnish case and the conclusions we can draw from it significantly depend

<sup>2</sup> P. IHALAINEN, *The Springs of Democracy*, 2017, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> P. HAAPALA, *Kun yhteiskunta hajosi*, 1995; A. JYRÄNKI, *Kansanedustuslaitos ja valtiosääntö*, 2006; M. TIKKA/P. KARONEN, *Säätyjen edustajat*, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> I. SULKUNEN, *Suomi naisten äänioikeuden edelläkävijänä*, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. I. SULKUNEN/S.-L. NEVALA-NURMI/P. MARKKOLA, *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship*, 2009; A. KORPPI-TOMMOLA, *A Long Tradition of Equality*, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> I. SULKUNEN, *An International Comparison*, 2015; see also J. MARKOFF, *Margins, Centers, and Democracy*, 2003.

on the context within which it is placed. Ida Blom has analysed struggles for women's suffrage in the five Nordic countries, pointing to the exceptionality of Finland, in that elsewhere women typically got suffrage later than men, but also to similarities between Finland, Norway and Iceland, where political struggles for the democratization of citizenship and national struggles were intertwined.<sup>7</sup> Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild and Eric Blanc, in turn, point to the particular revolutionary circumstances of Russia as the decisive factor of the Finnish reform. Ruthchild has discussed the suffrage reforms introduced in Russia and Finland between 1905 and 1917, suggesting that the breakthrough in Finland in 1906 »had much more to do with Finland's peripheral place within the Russian Empire than its location in relation to the heartland of Europe«<sup>8</sup>. Finland was peripheral in relation to both the West and Russia and could hence freely experiment with women's suffrage.

The above mentioned studies combine structural analysis with an agency perspective and demonstrate the manifold nature of women's agency in Finland, which varied from patriotism triggered by the fear of a loss of national autonomy to political reformism. Sulkunen underscores the joint struggle of men and women within the Social Democratic and temperance movements, which mobilized the masses for social and political reforms.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Blanc underlines tensions between men and women within the Social Democratic Party with regard to women's emancipation. His conclusion is that the »victory may not have been possible without autonomous female self-organization and mobilization«<sup>10</sup>. He questions the role of non-socialist women as true democrats because they were hesitant about universal suffrage.<sup>11</sup> Marjaliisa Hentilä, in particular, has analysed the connections between Finnish socialist suffragists and their German counterparts and the mutual influences, travelling between Finland and Germany, thus addressing the topic of suffrage internationalism.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to the *transnational* entanglements of the history of suffrage, we revisit the connections of Finnish feminist activists and organizations in such inter- and transnational exchange. Sissel Rosland has pointed out how Norwegian women's suffrage (1907/13) was used as an example in British campaigns and has explored the role of activists in transnational exchanges. The Norwegian activists provided the British reformists with a model that demonstrated how women's suffrage led to social reforms but to none of the evil consequences sug-

<sup>7</sup> I. BLOM, Structures and agency, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> R. GOLDBERG RUTCHILD, Women's Suffrage and Revolution, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> I. SULKUNEN, Suomi naisten äänioikeuden edelläkävijänä, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> E. BLANC, »Comrades in Battle«, 2017, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9; see also I. SULKUNEN, Suomi naisten äänioikeuden edelläkävijänä, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> M. HENTILÄ, Arbeiterfrauen im finnischen Parlament, 2006; see also M. HENTILÄ, Maa jossa piitkin saivat äänestä, 1989; M. LÄHTEENMÄKI, »Pohjoinen mallimaa«, 1989.



gested by anti-suffragists.<sup>13</sup> Norway constitutes an interesting point of comparison here since in international debates Finland and Norway were often referred to as parallel examples.

Our analysis covers the period from the Finnish reform of 1906 to the post First World War period, which saw the introduction of women's suffrage in countries such as Russia, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Our approach to the international and transnational history of the Finnish reform is twofold: firstly, we reconstruct some examples of the inter- and transnational connections of Finnish suffrage activists, asking how the international community of suffragists saw the Finnish reform. For this purpose, we have applied a variety of sources, particularly media coverage. Secondly, we analyse the reception of the Finnish reform in several Western European parliaments (Belgian, British, Dutch, French, German, Norwegian and Swedish), focusing on the positive reception by pro-suffragists and the negative reactions of anti-suffragists. To what extent, how and why was the Finnish »model« politicized in different national parliamentary debates for and against women's suffrage? The digitization of parliamentary debates has made this comparative and transnational survey possible. The countries mentioned varied widely with regard to the introduction of the vote for women and in terms of the intensity of the suffrage campaign. British suffragists and suffragettes were in many ways pioneers, but Dutch and German activists also emerged as eminent figures internationally.

### **The international visibility of the Finnish reform within suffragist communities**

Transnational, non-socialist feminist historiography of the early twentieth century emphasized the Seneca Falls conference, held in 1848 in the United States, as the starting point of suffrage history. However, it took several decades before intensive campaigning for equal citizenship started up in various countries. The intensification, for example in the form of the establishment of national suffrage associations, benefited from connections and transfers across borders.<sup>14</sup> In summer 1904, the International Woman's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) was established in Berlin to promote the exchange of ideas and experiences internationally. In Finland, Annie Furuhjelm, an activist of the Women's Association *Unioni* who soon became internationally active in the IWSA and a representative of the

<sup>13</sup> S. ROSLAND, *Norway as an Example*, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. E. C. DUBOIS, *Woman Suffrage Around the World*, 1994; G. BOCK, *Frauenwahlrecht*, 1999; J. CARLIER, *Forgotten Transnational Connections*, 2010; C. OESCH, *Kooperation, Konkurrenz und Separation*, 2019.

Swedish People's Party in the Finnish parliament, was inspired by her experience at this particular conference and raised awareness within her circles. At a meeting held in late 1904, the participants, who came from both socialist and non-socialist camps, were given a printed talk by John Stuart Mill<sup>15</sup> (made in 1871 and translated into Swedish in 1904) to support the claim of women's suffrage.<sup>16</sup> Finnish non-socialist feminists employed arguments adopted from the international discourse, emphasizing the interdependence of rights and duties as the essence of citizenship.<sup>17</sup> They also shared the view that women had gender-specific capabilities, which were crucial for reforming the moral basis of society.<sup>18</sup>

In 1904, Finnish non-socialist feminists shared the internationally accepted view that women should receive the vote on the same terms as men already had achieved.<sup>19</sup> This was cause for major disagreement between non-socialist and socialist women, as the latter rejected any class-based discrimination and claimed an individual vote for every single man and woman. Finally, the pressure from the masses and the General Strike in October 1905 in particular pushed the non-socialist women to accept the claim of suffrage in its most extensive form.<sup>20</sup> After the introduction of the reform in 1906, they felt that the »whole world« was watching and that, as pioneers, Finnish women had to prove women's capacity to fulfil the duties of citizenship. Consequently, in the years 1906–07, many members of non-socialist organizations actively communicated the experiences of female suffrage to other countries and international women's organizations.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, they did not refer to their original claim for a restricted vote in their reports and communications. Among the group of socialist women, Hilja Pärssinen, a school teacher and leader of the Finnish Social Democratic women, took on the lead. She had close connections with Germany, and based on this exchange the Finnish reform and the »bourgeois« women's allegedly conservative policies were amply commented upon in the *Gleichheit*, the internationally leading socialist women's periodical.<sup>22</sup>

The international community of non-socialist suffragists also looked on, and attention was paid to Finland in feminist media coverage and other publications in various countries. Suffragists themselves addressed the subject of mod-

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<sup>15</sup> J. S. MILL, Tal hållet i Edinburgh i januari 1871, 1904.

<sup>16</sup> A. FURUHJELM, Gryningen, 1939, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> G. BOCK, Frauenwahlrecht, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> A. ELOMÄKI, Rethinking political action, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> A. FURUHJELM, Gryningen, 1939, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Edustajakokous naisten äänioikeutta varten, in: NAISTEN ÄÄNI, sample number 1905, p. 10 (no author).

<sup>21</sup> ANNA LUNDSTRÖM, »Der Wahltag in Finnland«, in: DIE FRAUENBEWEGUNG, 15 April 1907, pp. 17–18; M. TIKKA/P. KARONEN, Säätöjen edustajat, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> M. HENTILÄ, Arbeiterfrauen im finnischen Parlament, 2006, pp. 30–32.

els and underlined their focal function in their campaigns internationally. Finnish women were seen as forerunners of a victory that was envisioned for all women.<sup>23</sup> The IWSA conferences in Copenhagen in 1906 and in Amsterdam in 1908 accordingly eulogized Finland, the former with regard to the introduction of the reform and the latter with regard to the first women MPs. At the Copenhagen conference, the revered president of the IWSA, Carrie Chapman Catt, declared: »There above us all the women of Finland stand today«. <sup>24</sup> Helena Westermarck, journalist, author and activist of the Women's Association Unioni, was invited as an honorary guest to the 1911 Stockholm conference.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to many other Finnish feminists, she was never elected to parliament.

At the Copenhagen conference, congratulations on the victory of Finnish women were linked to the victory of the nation, namely the end of Russification.<sup>26</sup> In Amsterdam, in turn, the participants expressed their sympathy for and solidarity with Finnish women because of the new Russification measures introduced in the country.<sup>27</sup> Aletta Jacobs, the Dutch hostess, greeted the Finns as »the only nation that has given women a place in their parliament«, <sup>28</sup> while Annie Furuhjelm concluded in her report on the Finnish experience that it did not necessarily provide a model for others as it had risen out of revolutionary movements and connected social unrest in Russia and Finland.<sup>29</sup> Finland's status as a not fully independent state and its location on the European periphery – seen from the viewpoint of the metropolises of Europe – can explain why Finland's pioneering role was acknowledged but also to some extent seen as an anomaly. For instance, when Ida Husted Harper came to Finland after the Amsterdam conference to examine the place where the victory had been won, she admitted that she had not expected to see such a civilized country.<sup>30</sup> A further explanation is international non-socialist concern for rapid changes in suffrage and representation that might support the rise of socialism, as could be seen in Finland. Furthermore, socialist members of national parliaments were most eager to refer to the Finnish model, as we shall see.

<sup>23</sup> ELSE LÜDERS, »Die internationale Frauenstimmrechtskonferenz in Kopenhagen (7.–11. August 1906)«, in: *Die Frauenbewegung*, 1 September 1906, pp. 129–131.

<sup>24</sup> I. HUSTED HARPER, *The History of Woman Suffrage, 1900–1920*, p. 814.

<sup>25</sup> H. V.: Kansainvälinen naisten äänioikeuskokous Tukholmassa, in: *NAISTEN ÄÄNI* 11 (1911), p. 126.

<sup>26</sup> A. v. WELCZEK, *Das Frauenstimmrecht in den verschiedenen Ländern*, 1908, p. 12; H. BORELIUS, »Rösträttskvinnor vid kongressen i Köpenhamn«, 1906, in: *DAGNY* (15) 1906, p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> N. K.: Kansainvälinen naisten äänioikeuskokous Amsterdamissa, in: *NAISTEN ÄÄNI* 13/14 (1908), p. 200.

<sup>28</sup> DE TELEGRAAF, 15 June 1908, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> HET VOLK, 19 June 1908, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> IDA HUSTED-HARPER, 1908, p. 201. On construction of hierarchies within feminism, see e.g. T. KINNUNEN, *The National and International in Making a Feminist*, 2016.

The history of women's suffrage shows how the pioneering countries also engaged in competition over which one really was the first to grant it – a feature that has remained part of the construction of national identity also in later times. The classical work on women's suffrage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, gave Norway the credit for being the »first independent Government« in Europe to enfranchise women. The non-socialist discourse ignored the fact that not all women were included in the Norwegian reform of 1907. For instance, in her speech at the Amsterdam IWSA conference, cited in *History of Woman Suffrage*, Carrie Chapman Catt announced that »Norwegian women come with full suffrage rights«<sup>31</sup>.

It was not only Norwegian suffragists who were active in presenting their country internationally as a model of equal citizenship. In the booklet *Was die Männer Finnlands vom Frauenstimmrecht sagen*, published by the Finnish Women's Association Unioni for the IWSA conference held in Budapest in 1913, leading Finnish male politicians responded to the negative views expressed abroad on women's political citizenship. The politicians had been selected to address certain audiences: they were all non-socialist higher-class men with Germanic (non-Finnish) names and often professors or barons or at least MPs. To clear up foreign misunderstandings about women's suffrage, these men underscored women's proven capacities as parliamentarians and the contribution of women's suffrage to the nation's strength in Finland. According to Senator Leo Mechelin, a Liberal who had chaired the ministry that had introduced women's suffrage, »the utterances of the women who take part in the debates are mostly equal to those of their male colleagues as for eloquence or knowledge.«<sup>32</sup> A particular contribution by women was bringing up important social issues that might have been overlooked by men. As for claims about suffrage disturbing family life, they were for Mechelin »mere fancy by weak men who are concerned about their traditional authority.«<sup>33</sup> P. E. Svinhufvud, the Speaker of Parliament, emphasized that he had never heard anyone expressing dissatisfaction due to women's suffrage in Finland.<sup>34</sup> The overall message of these male commentators was that women's suffrage had caused no disaster but had rather produced higher patriotic solidarity (against Russification) between the sexes. As we shall see, Swedish and Dutch male MPs, among others, came up with this kind of transnational »propaganda«.

The booklet exemplifies how complex the Finnish political situation was when women's suffrage was introduced and how general political divisions affected

<sup>31</sup> I. HUSTED HARPER, *The History of Woman Suffrage, 1900–1920*, p. 821.

<sup>32</sup> FRAUENRECHTSBUND »UNIONEN«, *Was die Männer Finnlands vom Frauenrecht sagen*, 1913, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

feminist organizations as well. Class identification divided the activists into socialists and non-socialists, but the non-socialists did not constitute a coherent political front either: language disputes divided them into Finnish-minded and Swedish-minded, and they also disagreed over the best way to deal with Russification policies. The conservative Finnish-minded Old Finns, and with them the Finnish Women's Society, promoted a strategy based on the so-called compliance towards Russians with the ultimate goal to save autonomy, whereas the more liberal Young Finns, together with the Swedish People's Party and with them the Women's Association Unioni, called for open yet peaceful resistance.<sup>35</sup> Such constitutionalist resistance pushed aside the language dispute within Unioni. As the booklet was published by these Unioni women, the selection of pro-suffrage male voices was based on their political identification. Accordingly, the concept of patriotism was characterized by a specific constitutionalist connotation.

In the Finnish parliament itself, women MPs got down to business, focusing mainly on women's and children's issues, which sometimes gave rise to foreign comments about women being interested in women's questions only. Indeed, female parliamentarians themselves distinguished between *political* and *social* issues. Despite their shared interest across class divisions in social issues, disagreements *among* women MPs were also obvious in this respect, reflecting ideological divisions – based on class but also on controversies among non-socialists – constructed in political discourses that bypassed gender as the basis for a common identity. For example, the status of illegitimate children divided women. These disagreements reflected divisions within international feminism as well: the German socialist editor of the women's periodical *Gleichheit*, Clara Zetkin, who enjoyed some influence among Finnish socialists, for instance, denounced sisterhood between bourgeois and socialist women. Apart from politics, some non-socialist women had difficulties in accepting the humble social background of their socialist colleagues. In some cases, these disagreements were covered by the media outside Finland.<sup>36</sup> In some other cases, traces of the disagreements and frustrations can be found in private correspondence across borders.<sup>37</sup>

In parliament, Ida Aalle-Teljo of the Social Democrats claimed that »bourgeois« women remained unwilling to advance women's cause, being ready to »kill and bury« reforms, and hence a class struggle by working women was the only way forward. She also criticized non-socialist women activists in women's conferences abroad, claiming that »bourgeois ladies« participated only in order to flaunt their supposed progressiveness, enjoying the adulation accorded to higher-class women. Aalle-Teljo accused them of claiming to have advanced re-

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<sup>35</sup> M. ENGMAN, Språkfrågan, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> M. HENTILÄ, Arbeiterfrauen im finnischen Parlament, 2006, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> T. KINNUNEN, The National and International in Making a Feminist, 2016, p. 663.

forms that were favourable to women, which in her view was not true.<sup>38</sup> The socialist reference to »higher-class women« was directed at Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg, in particular. Gripenberg, an MP representing the conservative Old Finns but characterized in previous research as »one of the great international women-networkers«<sup>39</sup>, was critical of the fact that suffrage had been extended to every man and woman. Citing international sources but also reflecting the widely shared view among Finnish non-socialist suffragists before reform pressures became overwhelming during the General Strike of 1905, she preferred the gradual extension of suffrage. She was also sceptical about the benefit of the simultaneous introduction of the eligibility of women since she thought that most women lacked moral and intellectual qualities needed in politics. She was highly critical of socialism in general and of socialist women MPs in particular. In order to counteract socialist influence she felt obliged to work as an MP herself.<sup>40</sup> Gripenberg epitomizes the tensions and paradoxes of the beginning of universal suffrage in Finland: not fully convinced about democracy this conservative lady worked as an elected voice of the people.

### **The politicization of the Finnish model by pro-suffragists**

In all the studied parliaments, the Finnish case played a role in reformist arguments for women's political rights. Sweden, as Finland's former mother country, was an obvious market for the model. The Finnish reform triggered excitement among Swedish women suffragists, who were disappointed with the fact that the Swedish – allegedly more progressive – nation had not blazed the trail towards equal citizenship. Attempts to extend male suffrage in Sweden activated women of different political backgrounds to demand suffrage. However, in order to get male suffrage through the bicameral parliament, in which the conservatives dominated the upper chamber, the liberal government limited the extension of suffrage to adult males in 1909.<sup>41</sup>

Simultaneous Finnish plans for universal suffrage were politicized by the parliamentary left: Carl Lindhagen, the left-liberal mayor of Stockholm, presented »the daughter country« as »something much more than a model« for »the mother country«: Swedes, too, should convene all the political forces of the nation to a parliament representing all citizens, men and women.<sup>42</sup> Hjalmar

<sup>38</sup> Valtioapäiväasiakirjat, Eduskunnan pöytäkirjat (EK), 24 February 1914, p. 225.

<sup>39</sup> S. ZIMMERMANN, *The challenge of multinational empire*, 2010, p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> T. KINNUNEN, *The National and International in Making a Feminist*, 2016, p. 658.

<sup>41</sup> S. NICKLASSON, *Högerns Kvinnor*, 1992, p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> Riksdagstryck, 1906, Report of the Constitutional Committee, No 7, 214; Riksdagstryck, Riksdagsprotokoll, Andra Kammaren (AK), 27 February 1906, (sitting:page) 19:14; 14 May 1906, 54:49.

Branting, the editor-in-chief of *Social-Demokraten*, proposed a motion on universal suffrage and proportional representation, referring explicitly to the Finnish model.<sup>43</sup> Lindhagen and Branting renewed these arguments after the first parliamentary elections in Finland, insisting that women's suffrage and the possibility to stand for election could no longer be delayed in Sweden,<sup>44</sup> albeit without success.

In France, too, some feminists were encouraged by the Finnish reform of 1906 to participate in the campaigns of the parliamentary elections of that year. They believed that women were joining forces internationally and criticized France for lagging behind.<sup>45</sup> In 1909, Marcel Sembat of the far left challenged the male monopoly of political power in the French parliament, claiming that »the entire world« was planning women's suffrage. Sembat referred to the British debates; to Norway, where Anna Rogstad had been elected as a deputy MP; to certain American states; and to Finland, where numerous women had already been elected.<sup>46</sup> However, the Finnish connection was weak in France, just as it was in Belgium, where Emile Vandervelde, the president of the Second International, took up the introduction of universal suffrage in Finland as an argument for the extension of suffrage but doubted the ability of Belgian politics to follow the example.<sup>47</sup> In 1913, René Colaert, responding to a petition to parliament sent by Catholic feminists,<sup>48</sup> cited a story in *La Revue socialiste* on how women's political involvement had contributed to the creation of new legislation on child and female labour, equal pay, intoxicants and gambling in the British dominions and in Finland.<sup>49</sup>

When the British House of Commons debated the Women's Enfranchisement Bill in 1908, Charles Mallet mentioned the Finnish example alongside those of the Isle of Man and certain American states, giving pre-eminence to the former: »Women had the vote in Finland, and no man with a spark of humanity could grudge them any privileges which they derived from it there.«<sup>50</sup> For Thomas Kettle, too, the Finnish case reinforced the examples of the culturally more relevant Australia, New Zealand and Norway, women's suffrage having been »admittedly exercised for the benefit of the community« in those countries. Norway was for Kettle »the best governed country and perhaps one of the greatest

<sup>43</sup> Riksdagstryck, 1906, Motions to the Second Chamber, No 137, 6; AK, 14 May 1906, 54:42.

<sup>44</sup> Riksdagstryck, 1907, Special Committee, No. 3, 216, 228; AK, Motions, No 205, 7; No 208, 9.

<sup>45</sup> K. OFFEN, Debating the Woman Question, 2018, pp. 486, 488–9, 533.

<sup>46</sup> Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires, Chambre des députés (CD), 29 September 1909, p. 2290.

<sup>47</sup> Plenum.be, Chambre des Représentants de Belgique (CR), 8 May 1906; 24 January 1908.

<sup>48</sup> J. CARLIER, Forgotten Transnational Connections, 2010, p. 516.

<sup>49</sup> CR, 7 February 1913.

<sup>50</sup> Hansard Corpus, Debates of the House of Commons (HC), 28 February 1908, p. 236.

intellectual forces in Europe«. <sup>51</sup> In Norway itself, the Finnish reform was of little interest as a result of women's partial suffrage at home from 1907 onwards. However, Wollert Konow (Radical Liberal) singled out Danish, Finnish and Norwegian women – all as Scandinavians – as enjoying greater political and social rights than German women, for instance. <sup>52</sup>

In Sweden, leading conservative academics consistently questioned the validity of comparisons between Finland and Sweden, and reformists, too, referred to the Finnish model with caution. Mauritz Hellberg (Liberal), editor-in-chief of *Karlstads-Tidningen*, hoped that women's suffrage would be introduced in Sweden without causing a national crisis of the type that had resulted from Russification in Finland. <sup>53</sup> Referring to high voting rates among Finnish women, he believed that the figures would be even higher in Sweden as a more developed country. <sup>54</sup> Nils Edén of the Liberals presented the pioneering models of the political role of women in other Nordic countries as an argument for women's suffrage in Sweden as well. <sup>55</sup> Hellberg criticized sentiments of a »certain superiority« towards Finland, referring to the »unanimous testimony« (in the booklet *Was die Männer Finnlands vom Frauenstimmrecht sagen*) that women's vote had been awarded for their invaluable support in defence of the nation. <sup>56</sup> When the suffrage question was back on the agenda at the »democratic moment« of spring 1917 <sup>57</sup>, Edén, as the chairman of the Constitutional Committee, pointed to the examples of Britain and the Netherlands as being even more weighty than the »radicalism« of small countries such as Finland, Norway and Denmark. <sup>58</sup>

In Germany, Social Democrats and campaigners for women's suffrage observed Finnish developments. Clara Zetkin, in particular, made use of the Finnish example when pressing for enfranchisement of working women on the occasion of the International Women's Day. <sup>59</sup> Numerous articles by the Finnish MP Hilja Pärssinen, published in *Gleichheit* and summarized in *Vorwärts*, contributed to the normalization of women's political activity by reporting about *Arbeiterinnen*, *Proletarierinnen*, *Agitatorinnen*, *Vertreterinnen* and *Parlamentarierinnen*. <sup>60</sup> However, in the *Reichstag* comparative references to Finnish women only

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>52</sup> Stortingsforhandling (ST), 24 June 1909, p. 476.

<sup>53</sup> Riksdagsstryck, Riksdagsprotokoll, Första Kammaren (FK), 13 May 1911, (sitting:page) 28:27.

<sup>54</sup> FK, 18 May 1912, 37:57.

<sup>55</sup> AK, 22 August 1914, 67:39.

<sup>56</sup> FK, 22 August 1914, 59:23, pp. 26–27.

<sup>57</sup> P. IHALAINEN, *The Springs of Democracy*, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> AK, 9 June 1917, 78:62.

<sup>59</sup> M. HENTILÄ, *Arbeiterfrauen im finnischen Parlament*, 2006, pp. 25–41.

<sup>60</sup> VORWÄRTS, 26 April 1912, p. 13; 23 February 1913; 26 February 1914, p. 7.



emerged in July 1917, after the Kaiser's Easter Message announced democratic reforms (but did not mention women's enfranchisement) and motivated women's organizations to petition for suffrage. The Social Democrats and most Liberals seemed supportive of their demands. At the same time, the socialist majority in the Finnish parliament was aiming at parliamentary sovereignty, and Georg Gradnauer of the Social Democrats cited the Finnish parliament as one of the models to follow as »a whole row of very clever women sit« there.<sup>61</sup> Arthur Stadthagen likewise listed Finland among those countries in which women's political rights had been applied »with most excellent results«<sup>62</sup>. At the time of the actual introduction of women's suffrage in Germany, the report of the Constitutional Committee concluded that »in Finland, too, the admission of women has led to the best possible experiences«<sup>63</sup>.

The most unexpected case of both the positive and negative reception of the Finnish women's suffrage originates from the Netherlands. A revealing incident occurred in 1913 when Hilja Pärssinen, a Finnish socialist female MP, was stopped at the Dutch border on her way to meet suffrage activists in Amsterdam and further on to a suffragette college in London. During the two-hour incident, competing ideological and gendered discourses surrounding the anomaly of female political agency clashed, leading to border authorities casting the identity of a Russian prostitute, rather than a member of parliament, on Pärssinen and her performing that identity as a protest. Afterwards, transnationally connected socialists such as Alexandra Kollontai and Johannes van Leeuwen politicized the incident through publicity and a parliamentary question in their fight for women's suffrage in the Netherlands, while the authorities did their best to depoliticize it.<sup>64</sup> In 1916, Van Leeuwen cited the testimony of MP Vera Hjelt (Swedish People's Party) on the harmonious consequences of women's suffrage, translated in the feminist journal *Belang en recht*, to persuade the Liberals in the Dutch parliament:

»To convince you of how groundless the fear of a detrimental influence on the family is, you only need to see how on election days most men and women – or man, wife and adult children – go together to the polls. Usually the man and wife support the same political party, but there are also exceptions, and no-one has ever heard that this has caused any problems.«<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags (DR), 6 July 1917, p. 3510.

<sup>62</sup> DR, 6 July 1917, p. 3521.

<sup>63</sup> DR, Aktenstück Nr. 895, Erster Bericht des Verfassungsausschusses, 1918, p. 1667.

<sup>64</sup> P. IHALAINEN, A Finnish socialist, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> BELANG EN RECHT, 1 July 1915, p. 3; Staten-Generaal Digitaal, Tweede kamer (TK), 24 October 1916, p. 213.

### The politicization of the image of Finland by anti-suffragists

The use of the Finnish example to argue *against* women's suffrage was equally common in foreign parliaments. In Sweden, Social Democrats and some Liberals remained alone with their calls to follow the Finnish model. According to Sven Palme of The Right Party, the Finnish reform was a contingent result of »the enthusiasm of a week of revolution«<sup>66</sup>, which reflects a prevalent non-socialist view. For Rudolf Kjellén, a conservative professor of political science, Finland was, like »the American Wild West« and Australia, a newly inhabited cultural periphery lacking an army and therefore irrelevant as a model for civilized political life in a country like Sweden.<sup>67</sup> Karl Hildebrand, editor of the conservative *Stockholms Dagblad*, doubted whether women in Finland and Norway were really interested in politics and suitable for political engagement.<sup>68</sup> In 1910, the conservative Prime Minister Arvid Lindman appointed a group to examine the consequences of female suffrage in Finland and Norway,<sup>69</sup> but in 1912 Gustaf Sandström from the Ministry of Justice concluded that no positive conclusions could be drawn from their experiences.<sup>70</sup> In this connection, Professor Wilhelm Lundström was annoyed by campaign material written by whom he called Finnish female politicians (*kvinnliga politicus*) such as MP Vera Hjelt being imposed on Swedish MPs and the public. What he referred to was obviously Hjelt's presentation on cooperation between men and women in Finland, given at an international congress on women suffrage in Stockholm in 1911 and printed in Helsinki. In Lundström's eyes, Hjelt's report proved that Finnish female MPs only focused on women's and children's rights, burdening the parliament with issues of little significance while neglecting the economy and higher culture. Furthermore, the Finnish parliament with its universal suffrage and female MPs was powerless in the face of Russia and consequently meaningless as a role model for the Swedes.<sup>71</sup>

In the British parliament, John Rees belittled the Finnish example as far-fetched and declared that he knew Finland, and [that] the women there did as their husbands told them to do.<sup>72</sup> F. E. Smith used statistics to question the model value of a minor state for the British Empire and »the civilised world«, referring to the lack of Finland's military power. *Whitaker's Almanac* stated that Finland had a population of three million and lacked an army, while the Brit-

<sup>66</sup> AK, 10 May 1907, 53:32.

<sup>67</sup> AK, 2 May 1908, 55:28–29.

<sup>68</sup> AK, 2 May 1908, 55:48.

<sup>69</sup> AK, 17 March 1910, 23:9.

<sup>70</sup> FK, 18 May 1912, 37:66.

<sup>71</sup> AK, 18 May 1912, 49:48–49.

<sup>72</sup> HC, 28 February 1908, pp. 282–283.

ish Empire had 450 million inhabitants, including »an Oriental population of 300 000 000 detesting government by women«. <sup>73</sup> According to Walter Long, too, Finland was »utterly unlike ourselves«, had a parliament that only decided on domestic issues and was not comparable with the Imperial Parliament, which ruled half the world and provided a political model for the rest. Besides, the Finns had not found women's suffrage to be of »any great advantage«. <sup>74</sup> Samuel Butcher reported on the basis of a dialogue with a Finnish socialist male MP that women's suffrage might imply not only the growth of socialism but also of the power of »spinsters« over male liberties. In the unicameral Finnish parliament, 30 members out of 200 were women (the actual figure was 17) and »highly Socialistic, and also highly moral in their legislative efforts« (13 MPs represented the Finnish Social Democratic Party). A female MP was, according to Butcher, typically a »discontented spinster« willing to ban the sales of alcohol and tobacco. <sup>75</sup> Butcher got nearly all of his »facts« about Finland wrong; he was rather recycling British prejudices towards native socialist suffragettes.

In Sweden, the Finnish case was actively cited when reformist pressures from home and abroad grew in 1917/18. Right-wing politicians turned the current constitutional crisis in Finland into a warning example. <sup>76</sup> When a political crisis in Finland led to a civil war, they took this as evidence that suddenly introduced universal suffrage was unable to prevent societal confrontations, the rise of revolutionary movements, the abuse of political rights or illegal acts. <sup>77</sup> Erik Räf and Carl Boberg insinuated that, while women's political involvement may not have been the driving force behind the Finnish Civil War, it had not produced any happy polity either. <sup>78</sup> According to rightwing leaders, no increased softness, motherliness or justice in politics could be expected as a result of political activities by women. <sup>79</sup>

Similar anti-suffragist views circulated in German conservative public discourse. Ludwig Langemann and Helene Hummel of the *German Union against Women's Emancipation* (*Deutscher Bund gegen Frauenemanzipation*) reported in 1916 that in countries that had awarded women's suffrage a considerable number of women hated politics and wanted to abolish that right. They suggested that women's legislative activities in Finland tended to focus on issues such as making divorce easier and improving the status of unmarried mothers and their children. They drew a causal connection between a 33 per cent rise in divorces

<sup>73</sup> HC, 11 July 1910, pp. 64–5; repeated by Frederick Banbury, HC, 19 June 1917, p. 1647.

<sup>74</sup> HC, 11 July 1910, p. 90.

<sup>75</sup> HC, 11 July 1910, pp. 146–147.

<sup>76</sup> August Bellinder, FK, 9 June 1917, 56:55.

<sup>77</sup> FK, 8 June 1918, 48:18; 48:29; AK, 8 June 1918, 71:66; 72:9.

<sup>78</sup> AK, 27 April 1918, 44:61; FK, 27 April 1918, 27:42.

<sup>79</sup> Arvid Lindman, AK, 27 April 1918, 44:40; Sam Clason, FK, 27 April 1918, 27:57.

in Finland during the first five years of women's suffrage. The 13 Social Democratic women members of the Finnish parliament also provided evidence on how socialists would benefit from women's vote. Transnational anti-suffragist discourse suggested further that Finnish women living in cities had lost their traditional senses of reason and equity since the introduction of suffrage: they had become so hot-blooded about their individual rights that they forgot the rights of others as well as their own duties for home and children. Women only cared for politics, pretending to be able to solve problems that »statesmen« had tried to solve in vain for years.<sup>80</sup>

In Belgium, women were still not awarded suffrage after the First World War. In connected debates, the Finnish example was politicized both for and against the right to vote for women. The Catholics counted on conservative women voters whereas the Liberals and anticlerical Socialists were generally opposed.<sup>81</sup> Vandervelde, now minister of justice, was sceptical about conservative support for women's suffrage and suggested that women as parliamentarians would continue their roles as mothers and only focus on welfare, education and the fight against alcoholism while disregarding general politics. As proof he paraphrased his discussions with female MPs in Finland before the war.<sup>82</sup> Léon Trochet, a Walloon federalist, drew a diametrically opposed conclusion, seeing Finnish female deputies as global pioneers and suggesting that the admission of women to deliberative assemblies was the best way to advance their political education.<sup>83</sup> Transnational connections and international comparisons could be exploited both ways, depending on the party political situation at home.

### **Conclusion: the inter- and transnational relevance of women's suffrage in Finland**

Concentration on the achievement of women's suffrage in one nation state makes it difficult to see the multi-sidedness of the debate surrounding it. Our transnational analysis on interactions within the international suffrage movement demonstrates how activists, ideas and experiences crossed borders in Northwest Europe and the anglophone world, albeit limited by the existing hierarchies of nations. Furthermore, our comparative survey of parliamentary debates from eight European countries demonstrates the existence of contemporary cross-na-

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<sup>80</sup> L. LANGEMANN/H. HUMMEL, *Frauenstimmrecht und Frauenemanzipation*, 1916, pp. 25, 72–73, 78–79, 81–82.

<sup>81</sup> J. CARLIER, *Forgotten Transnational Connections*, 2010, p. 516.

<sup>82</sup> CR, 26 February 1920.

<sup>83</sup> CR, 17 June 1920, p. 1714.

tional comparisons of women's suffrage and tendencies of nations to compete with and evaluate each other in this field as well.

For Finns, both men and women, the introduction of women's suffrage in 1906 constituted a further way to advance the cause of the nation domestically and to construct a civilized nation in relation to other nations. Women's suffrage distinguished the Finnish state from Russia while making the country interesting for Western public and potentially updating images of a peripheral and underdeveloped Russian governorate. The advancement of women's political rights has ever since been part of the Finnish national narrative and identity, gender equality being amalgamated with nationalism and Finnish men, too, being proud of politically pioneering Finnish women. In 2022, a centre-left coalition of five political parties, each led by a woman, is easily viewed as continuation in Finnish women's strong political participation, with its roots in the reform of 1906.

Elsewhere, arguments referring to countries that had introduced women's suffrage could be used either to normalize it and prove its positive effects or to demonstrate its evil consequences for the family and the nation. The repercussions of the vote were assessed in relation to the observer's own national and party political contexts and often interpreted in deliberately tendentious ways. The case of Finland could consequently be represented in a form that was only weakly linked to established facts, if not indeed downright fictional. A pioneering country in the concrete realization of women's suffrage also offered a source for news stories describing an unavoidable or a threatening development. Both among suffrage activists in various countries and within the IWSA, Finland was celebrated as a model case of this kind of modernity, whereas anti-suffragists willingly referred to warning experiences from Finland.

However, Finland also continued to be considered in many ways a peripheral, even an anomalous country. Norway often constituted an easier object of identification, but both of these national cases could be bypassed as irrelevant for greater nations. In transnational interaction, political agents in great powers typically referred to smaller states to serve their current political interests, and when they did, they remained highly selective. Even so, the experiences of the pioneering countries could not be entirely bypassed when women's political citizenship was debated.