

# THE SOCIALIZING INFLUENCE OF THE BALLOT UPON WOMEN

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The reaction of enfranchisement upon women's status in society and upon women themselves is one of the most interesting phases of the suffrage movement, but one which, for very good reasons, has been comparatively neglected. The philosophy of the movement and its social significance are too abstract to be generally useful in controversy and persuasion. The average person wants to know what women would do with the vote if they had it, what effect their vote has had upon legislation in the equal suffrage states and countries. His practical sense is appealed to when the relation of the vote to the work of looking after the home is indicated. His reason and sense of justice respond to such arguments as that of women being taxed without direct representation in the taxing authorities, of women forced to obey laws which they have had no direct voice in making. But when it comes to the subjective influence that the ballot may have upon women, the question moves out of the field of concrete and familiar interests, and of the simpler canons of justice and right. It becomes, instead, a question of social philosophy and psychology. It is for that reason, however, no less important as an argument for enfranchisement, and the present paper is given over to its consideration.

In approaching this phase of the question, we shall take as our fundamental premise that the development of human life has been conditioned by social relationships. In its most primitive forms, the advantage in the struggle for existence rested with the individuals who had the capacity for coöperation for purposes of aggression or defense. Mental and spiritual life had their origin and stimulus in the associated activity of play, festival and ceremony. Literature, art, and religion—all the higher activities of mind and spirit—owe their debt to the interchange of thought and feeling between man and his companions. Those we call the social virtues—sympathy, toleration, justice, unselfishness, self-control—all had their development in the association of human beings.



In the exercise of the social impulse and the growth of the social nature, the experience of women has been strikingly different from that of men. Such data as we have of their history reveal them as a group rigidly denied an opportunity for the development that comes from the establishment of wide and varied relations with their fellows. A review of the factors that have operated to exclude women from sharing as equals in the business of the common life would go far beyond the limits of this paper. Speaking generally their social and economic interests, and indeed the primary question of survival itself, have been promoted chiefly through influence with a particular individual—father, husband, or other male relative—rather than through direct coöperation with other women or with other men and women. Custom and tradition, built upon this fact, created an environment that kept them as a class apart and emphasized a fancied difference between their interests and capacities and those of men.

No serious attack was made upon the underpinning of this point of view until late in the eighteenth century. It was then, for the first time, that the condition of earning a livelihood for large numbers of women was offered on terms that did not imply personal service for their own families. A new way of carrying on their ordinary occupations was inaugurated with the invention of the spinning machine and the rise of the factory system—a way that was destined finally to drive the old household methods out of existence, except in remote places untouched by the new industrial order. Under the influence of an aggressive capitalism, women were drawn rapidly into an employ where their rôle as producers was divorced from their personal family relations. Never before had they worked in daily contact with each other as wage-earners. Never before had the occasion been offered for social impersonal relationships in the serious business of earning a living.

A new knowledge of each other, a new sense of comradeship, awakened under its influence. In defiance of the popular belief that there was something in the nature of women so different from that of men that it precluded the possibility of coöperation with other women, they have shown again and again their ability to stand by each other, to subordinate personal interests to the interest of the group. They have displayed courage and fortitude when it was necessary to face hardship and defeat. The progress of labor organ-

ization among industrial women compares very favorably with that among men, especially if one considers the tremendous obstacles that have been in their way—the public opinion that they were intruders in this field, that they ought to be at home, the youth of a great number of the group, their temporary stay in industry. An interesting thing about the organization of working women is the way that it has been fostered and strengthened by the direct help of women of widely different economic groups. It furnishes an example of a rare sense of solidarity. Factory operatives and women of independent incomes have joined in the effort to improve the working conditions of industrial employees. The sympathy and helpfulness of large-visioned women have bridged the distance that lies between the women of leisure and the women of toil, and they have worked as comrades in a common cause.

In other fields than the industrial, women have also shaken the tradition of their inability to work together. The reaction that women show today to their educational freedom upsets a lot of the notions we have inherited about the atmosphere of seclusion in which womanly natures have been supposed to thrive. In school and college, girls from families of varying economic status meet together in a democratic society. The question of economic condition is worthy of note because it is such a barrier in our ordinary social relations. From the start, the student finds herself identified by class denomination with anywhere from one hundred to five hundred others. Ask the average college girl what her college course has meant to her. In nine out of ten cases you will find that “it has been such a wonderful experience!” Probe this statement, and you will discover that it sums up the influence of associated activity in games, in dramatics, in class or society functions, in the numerous non-academic interests. It reflects the stimulus that has come in the broadening of her mental horizon, partly in the formal training of the class room, partly in the exchange of thought and experience with girls of many sorts from different parts of the country. Whatever fault may be found with our educational system, it has at least provided a belated opportunity for women to share in the social stimulus that men have found and prized in academic institutions.

The use that women have made of the increased leisure that has come to thousands of them in the last half century is further evidence of their enthusiasm for coöperative experience, of their

capacity to perfect organization, of their interest in social movements. Whether in a Browning club or a village improvement society, women have felt the stimulus of conscious coöperative effort. Today the General Federation of Women's Clubs, representing a membership of millions of women all over the land, is convincing evidence of women's organizing capacity, of their ability to provide and work with the machinery of association. What stronger refutation could there be of the time-worn assertion that women's interests are narrow and personal than is found in the resolutions passed at the biennial convention last summer in Chicago. Of the twenty-three resolutions, fourteen were concerned with matters that are of such general import as to require legislative action. The improvement of rural schools, the establishment of social centers for public discussion, increased appropriations for state and city boards of health, the protection of women and children from the danger of fire in factory and public meeting place,—these and other matters of public interest make up the bulk of the resolutions. Of the interests that are typical of "the woman's page," there is mention only when the federation goes on record as "heartily in favor of the movement for simple, becoming, and modest designs in women's clothes!"

From this brief indication of the reaction that women have shown when life has offered the opportunity to escape from a narrow and restricted environment, let us pass to the influence of enfranchisement upon women's status in society and upon women themselves. The most obvious effect of the vote is that it puts women upon a plane of political equality with other normal adults. Instead of being ranked in the political status of the criminal and the incompetent, they are recognized as persons entitled to express their opinion through the ballot upon matters of collective interest. Universal suffrage stands for a certain recognition of the stake that all human beings, irrespective of sex, have in the general welfare, and destroys a false sense of sex limitations.

By virtue of their new standing in the community, women assume an equal responsibility with men for both good and bad legislation. They become co-partners in the success or failure that accompanies legislative experiments, made presumably for their benefit. Many women are at present indifferent to matters of grave social concern, matters vitally affecting the welfare of their homes and families, because they lie in a field with which, they have been

taught, it is man's peculiar province to deal. A sense of personal responsibility would arouse women to take an interest in these questions such as they can never have as long as they are excluded from the enfranchised group.

Through this means their social relationships would be more clearly defined. To have a social imagination—to see other people's problems as our own—is a very rare possession. There are great difficulties in the way of knowing persons outside of a rather limited circle in a society like our own where the conditions of life are highly complex. Moreover, we are brought up in an atmosphere of custom and tradition that holds over from a fundamentally different social organization. Part of this tradition persists in the ideal that would shelter women from contact with the sterner sides of life,—an ideal which is no less misguided because it is well-meaning. Enfranchisement would open the eyes of many women who have not yet seen how closely interwoven are the interests of all men and women. Their mental horizon would be extended by the necessity of grappling with questions hitherto conveniently left for someone else to decide. These questions would have been positively fixed for their consideration since they are assumed and expected to vote upon them.

In exercising the right to vote, women are drawn into a wider circle of associated effort than any they have hitherto known. Here they find a chance to test their power of working with people. Here they find new demands made upon their toleration and sympathy. A basis of common purpose must be created so strong and compelling that it shall hold together the mixed elements of the group, and enable them to unite in promoting their collective interests. Are women equal to it? No adequate answer can be given merely through a process of introspection and reflection. Nor can it be found in argument or debate. The appeal must be made to experimentation. No limit can be set to women's capacity to develop new powers of coöperation until they are given the widest freedom for self-expression and for the practise of coöperative virtues.

Looking over the past century it is apparent that the trend of progress has been in the direction of removing the artificial distinctions that have been made between the interests of men and those of women, between the methods appropriate to men and women respectively in the development of their personalities, in the promotion of their common welfare. The enfranchisement of women

has been one of many factors that have contributed to this movement. Today it is taking precedence above all others. Women seem to have reached a point in their struggle for freedom where further progress is conditioned by the changed relation of men and women, the changed attitude of women themselves that comes with the right to vote.

It is well to bear in mind the enthusiasm and the determination with which in the face of great obstacles women have projected their vision beyond the narrow circle of home and family interests to see the changes that have revolutionized their household activities, and have undertaken the task of social adjustment that they demand. It is well to remember the spirit and the eagerness with which they have seized such part as they could gain in the rich and varied interests of life. Is it not reasonable to predict that the sense of social unity that such exceptional women have shown would be aroused by enfranchisement in countless other women who need definite encouragement to break through the barriers that keep them restricted in mental outlook and social sympathy?