

## **Module 02: Should Women Vote? The Politics of Suffrage**

### **Context**

#### **De Gouges and Wollstonecraft**

The notions of citizenship that emerged during the French Revolution of 1789 strongly influenced the subsequent women's suffrage movement in Europe. The radical ideology of the French revolutionaries was founded on the beliefs that all people shared common rights, that the government should be accountable to the people, and that all citizens had both the right and the obligation to participate in government. While most revolutionaries assumed that only men could and should be citizens, two documents emerged that would influence later arguments for women's suffrage. In France, Olympe de Gouges published her "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen," which rewrote the main document of the 1789 revolution, "A Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen." Drawing on the republican language of rights and citizenship, de Gouges argued that women should have the same rights as men: to vote, to serve in the military, to marry and divorce, and to seek an education. In the same vein, Mary Wollstonecraft, an important participant in English radical circles, declared in her 1792 text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that granting additional rights to women would, in fact, improve society by turning women into equal participants in all aspects of life.

#### **Nationalism, Socialism, and Liberalism**

In the first half of the nineteenth century, relatively little changed in the field of women's rights in Europe, although other processes were preparing the way for the widespread efforts that came at the end of the century. The spread of nationalism, an ideology that defined individuals or communities by shared ethnicity, language, geography, culture, history, or political boundaries, further promoted the idea of citizenship as an essential right and obligation. While women were not considered equal participants in early nineteenth-century nations, the idea of affiliations based on family relations, shared values, and social place supported claims for women's involvement in nation-building efforts. By contrast, socialism based individual and collective identity on social class and economic status. While socialism's emphasis on class tended to divide women into opposing categories, the denunciation of oppression and inequality provided a further basis upon which the women's movement would later campaign. Liberalism, by contrast, upheld the notion of equality, opportunity, and rights for all, which offered women

yet a third way to argue their claims for the right to vote. Just as liberalism promised the advancement of society as a whole with guaranteed rights and opportunities, advocates of women's suffrage would later argue for liberty and equality as promised to men. The three ideological positions — socialism, nationalism, and liberalism — paved the way for arguments both for and against women's suffrage in the late nineteenth century.

### **The Emergence of Campaigns for Women's Rights**

Although women's suffrage drew on common ideological positions, the distinct conditions of each country shaped campaigns for women's rights, the responses of government and society, and the outcomes of the debates. In many European countries, such as Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Spain, rule by hereditary monarchs meant that neither men and women were allowed full democratic political rights. Women were granted limited rights as citizens, and many did become active in reformist or revolutionary movements. In the absence of democratic institutions and practices, however, the demand for women's suffrage was frequently ignored until basic political rights had been won for men. In other countries, such as Germany, Denmark, and Ireland, the struggle for national unity and independence involved a simultaneous assertion of participation in the political system. Politically active women supported the nationalist campaigns, with the expectation that proving their citizenship in the national struggle would lead to their being granted the right to vote. The earliest campaigns for women's rights emerged in countries such as England and France, where citizenship and voting had been firmly established as political rights for men (although with important distinctions by class, religion, and location). In such countries, women suffered exclusion and oppression based solely on their gender. Understanding the stages of the campaign for women's suffrage requires an appreciation of how the context of each struggle shaped both the tactics of the advocates and the responses of opponents.

### **Early Proponents and Opponents of Women's Rights**

Across Europe, three distinct positions emerged regarding the question, Should women vote? Many advocates of women's suffrage, drawing predominantly on liberal notions of individual rights and democratic citizenship, argued that women shared common interests with men and therefore deserved to be treated equally by the law and political system. Others advocated suffrage on the grounds that society and politics would improve with the inclusion of women's interests, such as responsibilities to the family, commitment to culture, and presumed support for

peace. Opposition to women's suffrage emerged among those who believed that allowing women to vote would destabilize society, divert attention from more pressing concerns, or create precedents for even greater democracy. The three positions can thus be summed up as follows by their distinct responses to the question, Should women vote?:

**Yes**, because women were citizens, too, and thus merited the political and legal rights accorded to men;

**No**, because women's distinct interests would alter the proper political roles of men; or

**Yes**, because women's interests would promote changes in society that could lead to improvements in the future.

## **Broader Reforms**

Not all women supported — and not all men opposed — the extension of voting rights. But it was women, and particularly a core of activist women, who placed the issue on the agenda across Europe, mobilized support, and ultimately brought about such a fundamental transformation of European politics. While this module centers on the question of women's right to vote, it is important to recognize that the suffrage campaign built upon other campaigns for women's rights, including legal reforms to secure additional rights for women in marriage, educational reforms to provide more and better opportunities for young women, employment reforms to allow women to enter new professions, and social reforms that involved women in services such as public health, charities, and cultural activities.

## **Reform and Socioeconomic Status**

In all cases, the reforms made important distinctions along socioeconomic lines, because the changes were supported and designed primarily to serve the interests of middle- and upper-class women. Expanding educational opportunities, for example, primarily served the interests of young women whose families could afford to send them to school and who would be more likely to enter professions, whereas lower-class women would derive little benefit from such changes. Even charitable activities and social reforms, such as campaigns against prostitution or efforts to improve city sanitation, were aimed more at protecting middle- and upper-class women and their families from the lower classes than about improving the lives of lower-class women.

## **Class and the Right to Vote**

The issue of class was thus closely connected to the question of women's suffrage. Many European countries continued to restrict voting by socioeconomic status as well as by gender. Yet some proponents of women's suffrage argued that extending the vote to middle- and upper-class women would, in fact, strengthen the subordinate position of the lower classes. Some opponents of women's suffrage, by contrast, argued that any broadening of the vote would begin a process of democratization that would undermine the system of class differences. Finally, political radicals believed that enfranchising women would bring about meaningful change, since women were considered more sympathetic to the idea of incorporating other subordinate groups into the political system. The debate surrounding whether women should vote thus revolved around questions of class.

### **France**

While many feminists viewed the French Revolution as a key event in the establishment of the notions of citizenship and women's rights, the political instability of the nineteenth century in France created real difficulties for those advocating women's suffrage. Revolutions in 1848 and 1870 led to uncertainty and conflict, which conservatives blamed partly on the social disorder associated with demands for women's rights. The women's movement in France responded by asserting that women's distinct interests and contributions could improve society if women were more integrated into the political and civil worlds. In the context of the nineteenth-century debate in France, advocates of reform argued that women naturally had a strong commitment to peace, both domestically and internationally, that would support France's efforts to develop internal unity and maintain a balance of power in Europe. Proponents of reform also declared that women had more compassion for the poor, while their role in reproduction was committed to the promotion of national interests by raising a new generation of Frenchmen. The feminist Hubertine Auclert became one of the leading voices of the "difference" campaign in support of women's suffrage during the 1880s and 1890s. Although she initially shared the moderate views of most French suffrage organizations, by the early 1900s she engaged in more radical kinds of direct action.

### **Germany**

In Germany, where elected representatives had more limited powers, supporters of women's rights were more sharply divided among socialist, liberal, and

nationalist ideologies. Women's organizations first appeared in Germany in the 1860s, but for years their efforts focused more on educational, civic, and charitable activities than on political or legal reforms. The German Social Democratic Party, the largest in Europe, supported women's suffrage, but distrusted the motives of middle-class feminists who sought to reform, rather than overturn, the existing political system. Moderate feminists in Germany thus found themselves isolated between prevailing conservative and nationalist values and the distrust of radicals who were the strongest advocates of change. In the decade before the outbreak of war, the resurgence of nationalism in Germany put the suffrage movement even more on the defensive. The combination of conservative politics and nationalist sentiments made it extremely difficult to advocate any reforms that seemed to divide Germans or threaten the link between family and nation.

## **Russia**

In Russia, radical movements shared a commitment to women's equal participation in the utopian societies of the future. Many young women were actively involved in campaigns against the autocracy during the 1880s and 1890s, but in the absence of any meaningful system of political participation, demands for women's suffrage were given relatively low priority. In 1881, one of these radical women, Sofia Perovskaia, was executed for her involvement in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. During the early 1900s, however, a Russian feminist movement emerged actively campaigning for women's participation in a reformed political system. The concessions made by Tsar Nicholas II after the 1905 Revolution established a new constitutional system, yet women were still excluded from politics. Women's organizations continued their campaigns for voting and other rights within the existing system, but many supporters of women's suffrage looked to more radical movements, especially the socialist parties, for the wholesale changes needed to establish a more democratic political system that would guarantee women's right to vote.

## **Scandinavia**

The Scandinavian countries were the first to grant women's suffrage in Europe. In these countries, nationalism evolved in ways that were more inclusive, while moderate political systems allowed for a more gradual process of change. Women earned the right to vote in Finland in 1906, Norwegian women began voting in national elections in 1913, and women's suffrage was granted in Iceland and Denmark in 1915. Women's suffrage movements may have been more visible and

assertive elsewhere in Europe, but the first countries to grant women the right to vote were Scandinavian.

### **Southern and Eastern Europe**

By contrast, opposition to women's suffrage remained strongest in southern and eastern Europe, such as in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, where the Catholic influence on politics exerted a conservative influence over the question of women's rights. Liberals in southern and eastern Europe argued that, if women were more influenced by priests, granting them the right to vote would actually strengthen conservative forces within the political system. These countries, however, still figured among the last in Europe to grant women full voting rights.

### **Britain**

In Britain, a series of parliamentary reform bills between 1832 and 1911 extended the right to vote to more and more men, and thus encouraged women to think that they, too, would be granted suffrage. As early as the 1820s, women followed the earlier example of Mary Wollstonecraft in arguing for more rights for women. The emergence of the women's rights movement in the United States in the 1840s provoked further activism on the part of British women and like-minded men. In the 1860s, the liberal thinker and feminist sympathizer John Stuart Mill first presented a women's franchise bill to Parliament, but the bill failed to secure sufficient votes. Mill's advocacy of women's rights demonstrates that the issue earned support from men as well as women who shared a desire to broaden participation in the political system. During the following decades, social reforms aimed at education, employment, and health served both to extend rights to more women and to further underscore how women were being excluded from the evolving definition of citizenship. As women earned the right to participate in public activities, such as leading charitable and professional organizations or voting in school board elections, their participation locally became grounds for demands for further enfranchisement.

### **Suffrage and Imperialism**

In Britain as in other European countries, the debate surrounding women's suffrage also involved the question of imperialism. While proponents of suffrage argued that granting more rights to women was further proof of European cultural superiority, especially when compared to the "oppression" of women in other cultures, opponents of women's suffrage argued that European power depended

on the perpetuation of women's primary roles as wives and mothers. The debate thus took place against a backdrop of expanding European oppression of men and women in other regions, particularly in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia.

### **The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)**

By the 1880s, women's suffrage associations increasingly focused on persuading the main political parties that extending the right to vote to women was a necessary and logical continuation of previous reform efforts. In 1896, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), under the direction of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, was formed to draw together different organizations with similar objectives. The movement's liberal position argued that, by proving themselves to be responsible and active citizens in a pluralist society, women would earn the right to vote from men who recognized their valuable contributions to the general welfare. A more militant group within the suffrage movement emerged in the early 1900s under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christable and Sylvia, the founders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Arguing that direct action was the only way to bring about political change, the WSPU engaged in direct tactics, such as heckling speakers during political rallies, mass parades, chaining themselves to the gates of Parliament, smashing windows, setting postal boxes on fire, and vandalizing golf courses. Imprisoned suffragettes went on hunger strikes and were force-fed in brutal and humiliating ways until the government adopted the so-called "cat and mouse" rules, which meant that hunger strikers were released from prison, and then rearrested after they had recovered. The single most spectacular protest by a suffragette came in 1913, when Emily Wilding Davison ran onto a racetrack and was killed by horses running in Derby Day. WSPU militancy brought public attention to the question of suffrage, but many supporters came to believe that such tactics alienated moderates and strengthened opponents, which further postponed any kind of political reform.

### **The Extension of the Right to Vote to Women**

European women finally earned the right to vote, although in ways and at times quite different from the trajectories and campaigns of most suffrage movements. As mentioned above, the Scandinavian countries of Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland were the first, and only, European countries to grant women the right to vote before the outbreak of war in 1914. In Russia, women earned the right to vote during the 1917 Revolution, when liberals and socialists collaborated in democratizing the political system. The right to vote continued in the Soviet era,

even as other democratic reforms were eliminated. British women were granted the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1918. Campaigns by suffrage advocates and recognition of women's important contributions during the war finally overcame opposition. In Germany and Austria, both defeated powers, the postwar settlements included women's suffrage. The Weimar constitution of 1919 granted women the right to vote, which would make them an important constituency of the factionalized political parties that shaped the interwar period. Other countries that granted women the right to vote after the war included the United States (1919), Poland (1921), and Spain (1931).

### **France and Women's Suffrage**

Yet in France, the country whose revolution had first connected notions of citizenship with women's rights, it would be another two decades — at the end of yet another war — before the government of liberated France finally took the step. In 1944, more than 150 years after Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft sought to include women in the political revolution launched by the "Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen," French women had finally won the right to vote, thus bringing to an end the women's suffrage campaign in European history.