Adelisa SABIC: The development of Austrian women´s suffrage

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Introduction

For us women, it was not always a matter of course to take part in elections in our country. In Austria a general women's suffrage was introduced in 1918, which was not only a major step towards equal rights but a milestone in women´s politics as well.

1. Historical facts

More than hundred years ago, it was almost unimaginable to allow a woman to participate in political life, let alone to assign her a political role. Before universal suffrage for women was enshrined in law, there were only sporadic precursors.

At some provincial and municipal levels a part of women, favoured by census voting law, were included in elections. In 1873, paragraph nine of the *Reichsrat electoral regulations*, stipulated that only women, who were twenty-four years old, who were Austrian citizens and who paid the minimum annual tax, were considered and entitled to vote. Nevertheless, this was rare for women, as a male representative was usually sent to vote for them in elections.[466]

The curia suffrage, which was extended in 1896 to include a general class of voters, was replaced in 1907 by a general male suffrage, where obviously women again were not considered.[467]

[466] GAMPER, Anna: Ohne Unterschied des Geschlechts – 100 Jahre Frauenwahlrecht in Österreich [Without distinction of gender – 100 years of women´s suffrage in Austria]. *Juristische Blätter [Law Journal],* No. 142, 2020, p. 3. https://doi.org/10.33196/jbl202001000201
[467] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

2. First protests

2.1. Women´s demonstration in 1848

The first women´s demonstration recorded in Austrian history was in August 1848. The cause for the protests at this time was the dissatisfaction of the citizens.[468] The *Pillersdorf Constitution of 1848* contained the organisation of the Reichstag and the electoral regulations, but it was not possible to satisfy the people, as many ethnic groups were still not entitled to vote. At this time class voting rights were ruling.[469]

As a result of the above-mentioned circumstances, there was also an initial protest action on the part of women, which was primarily based on several aspects. The poor economic situation and rising unemployment were only one out of many reasons for women to start a demonstration. Furthermore, precarious working conditions and the non-existing welfare system were points that women mentioned in their demonstration demands. But particularly decisive for this demonstration were the extreme cuts in the salaries of women and young people.[470] This led to a violent collision between the female workers and the middle-class National Guard, also known as the "*Prater Battle*". This demonstration involved 3000 women and some men who were affected as well by the salary cuts. Their demand was: "*Equal pay for equal work"*. Nonetheless, the demonstration was brutally suppressed and is therefore also known as the "*August Massacre*". According to the social understanding of the time, it was taken for granted that women were not considered necessary to participate in elections.[471]

2.2. Vienna Democratic Women´s Association

Despite the bloody outcome of the women´s demonstration in 1848, women all around Austria did not give up and started the first political women´s association: the "*Vienna*

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[468] UNGER, Petra: *Frauenwahlrecht. Eine kurze Geschichte der österreichischen Frauenbewegung [Women´s suffrage. A brief history of the Austrian women's movement].* Berlin – Vienna, 2019, Mandelbaum, p. 28.

[469] PASSECKER, Meike: *Die Entwicklung des Frauenwahlrechts in Österreich 1848–1920 [The development of women's suffrage in Austria 1848–1920].* https://epub.jku.at/obvulihs/download/pdf/5833120 [Access on October 21, 2024]

[470] *Ibid.*

[471] UNGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–31.

Democratic Women´s Association", which was founded by Karoline Perin, whose members were mainly aristocratic and bourgeois women.[472]

The tasks and aims of the organisation were:

- To strengthen freedom and democracy
- To give women and girls an appropriate access to education
- To preserve the memories and achievements of the "*August Massacre*"[473]

For the first time, political demands were included in the statutes of an association, as women´s associations had previously only been dedicated to charitable purposes. However, the association was met with enormous reprisals and rejection, where men particularly tried to prevent the active involvement of women in political events. In addition, the press ridiculed the association. The end of the association came with the suppression of the Revolution by the imperial troops in October 1848.[474]

After the women had lost the association, their rights were restricted even further in the *draft constitution of Kremsier*. Men were to take over their representation, which is why no political participation on the part of women was necessary.[475]

In the following imposed *March constitution*, only self-employed women taxpayers were allowed to exercise their right to vote at municipal level, which means that women had to own a house or land and earn money from a business or trade. However, the vote was cast by male representatives. Yet this was not the case throughout the whole empire, as in many cities there was no voter turnout; for example in Linz there was one, but in Vienna and Trieste not.[476]

3. Significant Austrian women´s movements

The women´s movement in Austria after the mid-19th century consisted of three important movements. On the one hand there was the Civil liberal women´s movement and, on the other hand, the Social democratic women´s movement. These two pursued similar goals but

[472] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
[473] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[474] MEIKE, *op. cit.*
[475] *Ibid.*
[476] *Ibid.*

nevertheless differed in many aspects. The third movement was the Catholic women´s movement, which was a countermovement to the other two.[477]

3.1. The Civil liberal women´s movement

For centuries, the role model of women did not provide for economic or political independence. Women could only get a basic education, that served as a temporary measure until they got married and lived the life of a housewife and mother. After the mid-19th century, followed by an economic crisis, women started to consider what would happen if their husbands were no longer expected to provide for the family alone.[478]

As a result, the Civil liberal women´s movement emerged and for them, the path to women´s suffrage led via education and greater independence. To realise their goals, women needed a political voice, which is why the fight for women´s suffrage was taken up, and an increasing participation in associations. However, organising in associations required courage, as the previously adopted paragraph 30 of the *Associations law* prohibited women from becoming members of political associations.[479]

To discuss the issues women were facing constantly, the Civil liberal women´s movement founded in 1899 the association magazine *"The documents of women"* ("*Die Dokumente der Frauen")*. The founders were Auguste Fickert, a dedicated teacher and a fighter for women´s suffrage from the very beginning, Rosa Mayreder and Marie Lang. The magazine was published every two weeks in Vienna between 1899 and 1902. The main priority of the magazine was the demand for women´s suffrage. In addition, the editors documented current activities of women´s movements at domestic territory and those abroad.[480]

Especially Rosa Mayreder, one of the most influential intellectuals of her time, wrote in one of her publications, to counteract the degrading attribution to women, the following: *"We will only know what women are when they are no longer told what they should be" ("Man wird erst wissen, was die Frauen sind wenn ihnen nicht mehr vorgeschrieben wird, was sie*

[477] *Ibid.*
[478] *Ibid.*
[479] *Ibid.*
[480] UNGER, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

sein sollen"). Mayreder expresses for the first time with this statement the idea, that gender roles are learnt, and not innate.[481]

The Civil liberal women´s movement was the only women´s movement that was not subject to a political party line. It was *"The only genuine emancipation movement"* because they were more likely to discuss women´s issues with party representatives. As a result, their reporting was also very liberal, as there was no party affiliation.[482]

3.2. The Social democratic women´s movement

This women´s movement was tied to the social democratic party line. As a result, the demands of the women workers were based on the social democratic party programme. The requirements were women´s suffrage, a fair salary distribution, human working and living conditions and an improved basic education. Social democratic women demonstrated, went on strike, published and became involved in associations.[483]

Their newspaper, *"The women workers magazine" ("Die Arbeiterinnenzeitung")*, published between 1892-1934, was created as a medium for communicating political interests. Information about the organisation´s activities could be spread far beyond Vienna. The magazine focused on achieving universal suffrage, equal opportunities in education and the fight against exploitation. The co-founder and responsible editor was the factory worker and later member of the National Council, Adelheid Popp.[484]

After a debate at the party congress in 1892, women were granted the right to manage the newspaper independently of men, which was not the case before.[485] The following quote shows a statement of Viktor Adler, an Austrian politician, who confronted the women with their lack of education and questions whether they are qualified enough to take over the management of the magazine: *"…show us a female comrade who has the ability to produce the paper…" (…"zeigen Sie uns eine Genossin, die die Fähigkeit hat, das Blatt*

[481] UNGER, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
[482] MEIKE, *op. cit.*
[483] UNGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–50.
[484] MEIKE, *op. cit.*
[485] https://litkult1920er.aau.at/litkult-lexikon/arbeiterinnen-zeitung-die-frau/ [Access on October 22, 2024]

herzustellen…"). Victoria Kofler (worker and newspaper editor), however, countered Adler by stating that many men also had no qualifications for certain positions.[486]

Later, Adler, as a member of parliament, addressed women´s suffrage during the electoral reform debate in 1896, but he believed that universal suffrage for men had to be implemented first; that happened in 1907. Therefore, activists in the women´s movement put pressure on the delegates, but they did not achieve much as women were never allowed to be official members of political associations due to paragraph 30 of the *Association law*. Consequently, the associations were unpolitical.[487]

3.3. The Catholic movement

This movement consisted of women from all social classes, but leading persons were increasingly of aristocratic origin. Their principles and founding motive were the defence of the faith (catholic principles are the basic idea behind all social changes) and spreading the catholic way of life and not improving the position of women. This movement was a countermovement to the other two movements. They wanted women to return to their duties in society, which were having a family, raising the children and living the housewife life. Originally, this movement was organised in churches and mainly fulfilled charitable and social tasks. They supported the Christian Social Party as well.[488]

In 1897, catholic women enabled the party to win an impressive election victory. The association was always strongly controlled by male politics but by founding the first catholic women´s organisation in 1907 women gained more independence. The catholic women´s association published works. A particularly typical example of the catholic women´s press was the *"Austrian Women´s World: Monthly magazine for educated women" ("Österreichische Frauenwelt: Monatsschrift für die gebildete Frau"),* which was published by the Catholic Women´s Organisation of Austria between 1911 and 1919. Prior to this magazine, there was already an Austrian women´s newspaper: "*Magazine for the Christian Women´s World" ("Zeitschrift für die christliche Fraeuenwelt"),* which was published in

[486] MEIKE, *op. cit.*
[487] UNGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.
[488] MEIKE, *op. cit.*

Vienna from 1898 to 1906. In the named newspapers the Christian social association published their principles they stood for.[489]

4. 12th November 1918

Until 1918, the civil liberal and social democrat women´s movements were unable to achieve universal suffrage for women. Their biggest obstacle was paragraph 30 of the *Association law*. But as a result of the World War I, until the collapse of the monarchy, women had to take on more and more tasks that had been performed by men before the war. During this time, they did great achievements, which is, why it was no longer conceivable to exclude them from the right to vote.[490]

Finally, the *law of the 12th of November 1918 on the form of state and government of German-Austria* introduced a right to vote, that was to be based on the *"general, equal, direct and secret voting rights of all citizens without distinction of sex"*. Universal suffrage has been realised and there was no more curia and census suffrage, and citizens were now entitled to vote regardless of wealth and social class. Nevertheless, the law still contained some women-specific grounds for exclusion regarding paragraph 13, where e.g. women, who were under moral police surveillance still didn´t have the right to vote (for example prostitutes). Even though there were concerns women would not use their right to vote, the opposite happened. A voter turnout of 82.10% was achieved on the part of women (male voter turnout: 86.97%). On the 4th of March 1919 the arrival of the first female member of the national council represents the most significant highlight of women's achievements.[491]

Despite several barriers and the fact that this issue was heavily discussed before the introduction of women´s suffrage and even after its implementation, it still led to heated discussions. Nevertheless, a first major step was taken.

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[489] *Ibid.*
[490] UNGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–58.
[491] *Ibid.*, pp. 57–62.