

Dóra KARSAI: Does every successful man have a woman behind him? The progress of women's suffrage in the 19th-20th centuries

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Nowadays, it is taken for granted that everyone has universal suffrage, in other words, both women and men have the same conditions to pursue their suffrage and forms of that. Although, it has not always been like this. This study explores the position of women's suffrage during the 19th-20th centuries constitutionally and the possibility of receiving suffrage through history by men in 1848 and women only in 1918.

1. What does suffrage mean?

Suffrage is a fundamental political right by which people who have the entitlement to vote can express their opinion equally within the framework of the elections and influence the politics or perhaps the working of that state.¹ Recently, suffrage is an indispensable law as it is a restrictive and controlling legal institution of the democratic state, therefore the best form of guaranteeing the predominance of the folk in the state construction directly or indirectly.

The earliest form of the Hungarian suffrage appeared in a gradually evolving feudal diet within the frame of the jurisdictional authority of the independent election of the king after the extinction of the Árpád Dynasty in 1301. Article 35 of the Decree of 1447, which pronounced that the prelates and barons needed to make a consensual

¹ DIRNER, Gusztáv: *A nő választójogáról [On women's suffrage]*. Budapest, 1910, Budapest, Kilián Frigyes utóda, p. 10–12.

decision about the king election with a certain number of noblemen by shires, strengthened this right.² The diet, based on the feudalism, lived its heydays in the 15th-19th centuries since it was one of the fundamental pillars of state formation. For this reason, it affected an increasing social layer to take part in the function of the diet by deputies. Act I of 1608 laid down the base of sending envoys as a general authority. However, in the women's point of view, Section 1, Article 51 of the Decree 3 of 1681 by Leopold I meant a milestone as it provided the possibility of sending envoys to the diet for the widows. Since the widow took control over the estate after the death of her husband, as a successor, she was able to live with the right of sending envoys. We are only partially able to put down this ruling as the development of women's taking part in politics; rather, it is only just a privilege after their dead husbands. Throughout history, this measure disappeared with the cease of the feudal representative monarchy. Therefore, women did not even have this right of participation in the parliament or influence in the working of the state.³

Throughout Hungarian history, there were many examples of oppressed women who were not treated equally compared to their male companions. Shockingly, the example of women being sold without their consent to their future husbands by their fathers as objects of sales contracts in the Middle Ages reflects the improper treatment of women in society with almost no rights. Furthermore, women were entirely subordinated to their husbands, or sometimes they were legally in a worse position than those children living in the same household. They were dependent on their husbands and their willpower to control the affairs of their home was weak. In contrast, so many women's actions saved our country from threats and established flourishing progress of it. If they had not gone against the norms of the particular era and stood up for our country and themselves, then our state's successful progress would not have been possible. Cecília Szentgyörgyi Rozgonyi, who protected our country in the siege

² SzÜCS, Jenő: Királyválasztás a középkori Magyarországon [The election of king in the medieval Hungary]. *História [History]*, vol. 7, no. 5–6., p. 15.

³ MÁDAY, Andor: *A magyar nő jogai a múltban és a jelenben [The women's rights in the past and present]*. Budapest, 1913, Az Athenaeum írod. és nyomdai R.-T. kiadása, p. 117.

of Golubac (Galambóc) in 1428, is one these women who deserve respect, or Klára Dobó, who heroically contributed to the victory of the siege of Eger against Turkey in 1552. Ilona Zrínyi also promoted such bravery throughout the blockade of Mukachevo (Munkács) in 1685 or Erzsébet Szilágyi, who intended to protect her sons from Ladislaus V. After the death of one of her son, János Hunyadi, Erzsébet Szilágyi could also organise the kings' elections that her second-born son, Matthias Corvinus shall be the sovereign of our country. Anna Bornemissza Apafi rescued her husband, monarch Michael I Apafi, from the imprisonment of the Tartars. Moreover, Zsófia Patócsy Bebek protected the castle of Szádvár against general Lázár Schwendi or Zsuzsanna Lórántffy, who was flawless governor of Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár), while her husband, Francis I Rákóczi, was away.⁴

Due to the appearance and spread of Enlightenment, women's situation started to improve, more likely in social than legal or political aspects throughout the development of history. The fact that the positive changes in Hungary did not influence the formation of women's suffrage and men could prevail in rigid frames for a long time also proves this.

2. Why women should not get suffrage: reasons and rebuttals

The year 1848 meant a dramatic turn for the ballot of men. Following the revolution and war of independence,⁵ Act 5 of 1848 conveyed general suffrage, but only for men and was regulated by strict censuses.⁶ Regarding women, nothing has changed, which was strengthened by Section 2 of Act 5 of 1848, which graded being women as a

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵ KÉPESSY, Imre: National Modernisation through the Constitutional Revolution of 1848 in Hungary: Pretext and Context. In: KLIMASZEWSKA, Anna – GAŁĘDEK, Michał (eds.): *Modernisation, National Identity and Legal Instrumentalism (Vol. II: Public Law)*. Leiden, 2020, Brill / Nijhoff, pp. 51–68. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004417359_004

⁶ GOSZTONYI, Gergely: A polgári szabadságjogok [Civil liberties]. In: MEZEY, Barna – GOSZTONYI, Gergely (eds.): *Magyar alkotmánytörténet [Hungarian constitutional history]*. Budapest, 2020, Osiris Kiadó, p. 285.

drawback for the right to have suffrage.⁷ The politicians of the era came up with many scientifically claimed reasons against why women should get suffrage and have the right to affect the politics of the time. One of the sources of the problem was the conservative attitude of the politics towards women. Those who disagreed that women should get suffrage and therefore came up with many ridiculous reasons were scared from the novelty and its potential drawbacks, which could shift our country's politics in a new direction. Furthermore, women were not treated equally with men, and therefore, it was considered that women should not have a place in the duties of functioning the country.⁸

The first reason was the weakness of the woman's body, which was not appropriate from several aspects. Firstly, suffrage or participation in political life does not require any particular physical activity, in which respect for any person's physique or endurance can be interesting. Overall, women experience more physical exertions throughout their life than their men companions. For example, pregnancy and giving birth undeniably contain different difficulties for the woman's body.

The following incurring reason was the women's natural task which was the motherhood and the protection of the home-fire, and these were full-time tasks for a person. Dangerous thoughts arouse in the minds of both women and men about the purpose in the life of those woman who could not have children. Moreover, when a mother went to a tea party throughout the afternoon, which was a motherly duty, why she did not have any time to go out anywhere else. But the woman's task is not only housekeeping, nor the man's task is his job. Parenting is not a barrier for a mother to vote in an election, which recurs in many years, because it is not an all-day process. It takes less time, which the mother has spent away to her child. Lajos Kossuth formulated in the sheet '*Az érzelem világában (In the life of emotions)*' issued on September 27, 1893 that women, besides motherhood, should take an active part in the political life

⁷ MÁDAY, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁸ DIRNER, *op. cit.*, p. 5–7.

as guardian angels to support the Hungarian people in strengthening their patriotism.⁹ It was contradictory that a mother needed to show and teach patriotism to their children as much as men or more. Yet, the affection of a homeland condescended and suppressed them based on their gender.

It was thought that apart from physical delicacy, women were also weak mentally because they did not have the appropriate knowledge and thinking ability and did not receive the proper education regarding these matters. This assumption is questionable from many aspects, and it is only a negative generalization about women. Moreover, the state did not allow women to pursue higher education until November 18, 1895 and therefore supported the argument of their excuse. So many men also did not have the appropriate knowledge or thinking towards politics but could live with their right of suffrage, in contrast with all those women who had talent and ability but did not have that privilege. It was said that because of the weakness of the women's minds, men were influential to their decisions therefore, there was no reason why women should have the right to vote and make their will enforced. This is untrue as there were so many spinsters and young women who lived alone independently during the era. Thus, the generalization that women have a mental disability remains untrue as there were no valid reasons why they could not enact their will in peace, even against their husbands.

Many conservative men who did not support the extension of the political rights towards women conveyed in scientifically proved excuses that the size of a woman's cerebrum was smaller than a man's. Therefore, they were mentally oppressed by men. Moreover, they were moodier which could put the stability of the politics in danger within the states and strengthen the opportunity to worsen its quality and seriousness. This fact which many doctors supported, is only adequate from a biological point of view regarding that the human brain does not grow proportionately with the amount of knowledge stored within it, but it is within harmony with the natural progress. Apart

⁹ MÁRKUS, Dezső: *A választójog. A nő választójoga [The right to vote. The woman's suffrage]*. Budapest, 1912, Franklin-Társulat Magyar írod. intézet és könyvnyomda, p. 32.

from this, it is biologically proven that few men with bigger cerebra lack competence, and still have the right to vote. Naturally, it is not a disparaging statement about men, as women have less appropriate mental competence. But the difference in the case of men was their authority of rights based on cognitive abilities, at the same time, in the case of women, mental and body weaknesses were used as a universal excuse against them.¹⁰ All of the excuses mentioned above existence were supported by Section 1 of Act 33 of 1874,¹¹ according to which women had no suffrage, and Sections 6 and 7 supported its unfairness that they conveyed the eligibility for ballot according to the wealth and qualification for men.¹²

3. Feminist movements for the suffrage

The period between 1780 and 1825 could be considered the first era of feminism, which began before the French revolution with the spread of the encyclopedist literature. The women's existence and situation emerged as a literary and political question for the first time. This time interval lasted till the significant national reawakening. The first anonymous antifeminist work about the women's case was published in 1780, which title was '*Az egész világon levő legdrágább Kintsnek az az a' jó Feleségnek a rövid leírása (The short description of the dearest treasure world-wide is a good wife)*'. This publication was an advert reaction to the effects of the enlightenment on women. Moreover, the pamphlet titled '*Megmutatás, hogy az asszonyi személyek nem emberek (The exhibition that the women are not people)*' enhanced this tendency, which title was already repulsive.¹³ These pamphlets were about reinforcing the spirit of class for men with the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29–30.

¹¹ AMBRUS ATTILA JÓZSEFNÉ KÉRI, Katalin: *Lánynevelés és női művelődés az újkori Magyarországon (nemzetközi kitekintéssel és nőtörténelmi alapozással) [Girls' education and women's education in modern Hungary (with an international perspective and a foundation in women's history)]*. 2015, Pécs, http://real-d.mtak.hu/837/7/dc_1067_15_doktori_mu.pdf [Access on January 10, 2022], p. 116.

¹² MÁDAY, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

oppression of the spirit of class for women. The first pamphlet which advocated women was published in 1785 by Anna Carberi, which proved that women were also people and marked men as the cause of their oppression. The next significant step was the writing titled '*A tudós asszonyokról (About the scientist women)*', which was published in the '*Magyar Múza (Hungarian Muse)*' in 1787, wherein the feminist thinking was outlined sharply, and for the first time the thought of women's academic freedom occurred. In this era, the names of Péter Bárány and Ádám Horváth should be mentioned. They stood out for the importance of women's political rights, and initiated women's participation in the parliament, which they successfully reached. However, women were able to participate in the parliament as viewers. It is essential to mention the name and the work of Judit Dukai Takách who was a feminist writer and had a huge impact on the development of Hungarian feminist literature. One example of this was that the poet Dániel Berzsenyi wrote an ode titled '*Dukai Takács Judithhoz (For Judit Dukai Takács)*', which was a thought-provoking commitment and, on the other hand, a significant work of feminist literature. The Charitable Women's Association founded in March of 1717 by Hermina archduchess to help the indigents, was an essential milestone in the history of feminism. This was the first commitment to the social problems of the era by women.¹⁴

The second era of feminism was between 1825 and 1867. The beginning was the big national reawakening and the end of it was the ultimate formation of the National Training Institute for Women. This period was eventful in terms of women's movements and in history, too. Éva Takács Karacs published articles about the issue of serfs in the journal titled '*Tudományos Gyűjteménybe (Scientific Collection)*' in 1822,¹⁵ because women got massive assaults from the conservative nobility for their position in social life and for the reason of their overcoming of that. The question of women having the right to actively participate in scientific life arose in public life. Éva Takács Karacs stood out for women and argued for protecting women's right to intellectual work and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–146.

interests. The Enlightenment raised awareness in thousands of women that they did not have to live in their husbands' subservience, and also, the same rights behoved them as men's. The book of István Csontos '*A Szép nem ügyvédje az asszonyt becset sértegető vád-okok ellen (The attorney of the gentle sex against the charge reasons that offended women's value)*' was published in 1830 in Košice (Kassa).¹⁶ It was also mentioned in the journal titled '*Nő és Társadalom (Women and Society)*' in 1910 as a significant writing from the point of view of women's situation. Countess Teréz Brunswick, who established the predecessor of today's kindergarten in Buda, was an influential woman in the era. The era's big turning point was the Revolution of 1848, during which Hungarian women proved their bravery and their patriotism, therefore, feminist thinking spread. Blanka Teleki and Klára Leövey were among those women whose names are worth mentioning. In this period, the revolutionary situation was the cause that adumbrated women's rights efforts, but in truth, these efforts were purposely oppressed. The congress about the National Educational System was held on July 20–24, 1848 whereon only one woman, Teréz Karacs, the daughter of Éva Takáts Karacs, could take part in. The women's conscious oppression was proven by the fact that Paragraph 2 of Act 5 of 1848 separately highlighted women's existence as a disqualifying fact for suffrage. It is essential to mention the day of October 25, 1865 when Hermin Beniczky Veres published an article about women's education in the newspaper of Mór Jókai named '*Honban (Homeland)*'. For this, she was able to convene a conference on May 24, 1867 and in the framework, the National Training Institute for Women was permanently established in 1868.¹⁷

The third era was the period between 1868 and 1896. Historically the beginning of it was the permanent establishment of the National Training Institute for Women and the restoration of the constitution after the revolution and war of independence of 1848–49. The terminus was 1896, when university doors were opened for women¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–155.

¹⁸ LADÁNYI, Andor: Az egyetemi nőképzés. In: LADÁNYI, Andor: *Klebelsberg felsőoktatási politikája*. Budapest, 2000, Argumentum Kiadó, pp. 90–96.

thanks to the initiation of Julius Wlassics, Minister for Education and Culture. The school of the Training Institute for Women was opened for women on October 17, 1869 and with this, the bases of modern women's education have been laid in Hungary. The '*Nők Lapja (Women's Newspaper)*' originated in 1871 by Baroness Amália Egloffstein, which advocated the implementation of the right to vote for women. These views were advertised in articles which were saturated with feminist thinking. Along with the question of women's suffrage, women's equality started to be taken care of by public opinion more seriously, therefore it appeared in politics as a problem that needed to be solved. The work of MP István Majoros was considerable. He presented his draft '*A nőket a férfiakkal minden téren egyenjogósító tervezetet (The emancipation of women and men in all fields)*' to the Parliament on January 12, 1872,¹⁹ although, it was not negotiated during the session of the Parliament. The following year István Majoros was not an MP anymore, so the issue was forgotten. During the negotiation of Act 33 of 1874,²⁰ István Majoros stood out again for women's rights on the day of July 4, 1874. Besides him, Imre Stanescu took the floor with the same goal. These attempts did not lead to a complete success, as Act 33 of 1874 still did not assure suffrage for women. However, Act 23 of 1874 pronounced the full equality of women, which was a massive milestone from the aspect of women's participation in politics and the completion of rights. Another positive development in the era was the Act 22 of 1886 which pronounced that the major, unmarried, widow and divorced women were indirectly able to participate in the municipal assemblies. This Act was made to correct the setback compared to the feudal parliament.²¹

The period between 1896 and 1918 can be considered the fourth era, which covers the period between the opening of university doors for women and the

¹⁹ MÁDAY, *op. cit.*, pp. 169.

²⁰ BÓDINÉ BELIZNAI, Kinga – KÉPES, György: A népképviselési választójog [The right to vote in the representation of the people]. In: MEZEY, Barna – GOSZTONYI, Gergely (eds.): *Magyar alkotmánytörténet [Hungarian constitutional history]*. Budapest, 2020, Osiris Kiadó, p. 363.

²¹ MÁDAY, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–162.

attainment of their suffrage.²² The most significant year was 1904, when Vilma Glücklich and Rózsa Bédy-Schwimmer established the Hungarian Feminist Association, which was the leading feminist movement of the era.²³ They published the monthly newspaper, 'A Nő és a Társadalom (*The Women and Society*)'²⁴ one year later, which processed and compared the situation of women's suffrage world-wide to the Hungarian situation, thereby it exhorted the spread of this in the society. The question of women's suffrage was sorely important because emancipation dominated world-wide and also in Hungary, but without suffrage it was solely an empty institutional system. The vast, evolved power of feminism reached the Parliament.²⁵ During 1903 and 1905 Lajos Hentaller and Béla Barabás supported women's suffrage. In 1906, a question put on by the Society of Feminists about women's suffrage to the MPs got eleven favorable votes. However, PM Sándor Wekerle and Minister of Interior Earl Gyula Andrássy opposed and prevented the fulfillment of women's suffrage, therefore the process to achieve the goal significantly slowed down. November of 1909 is worth mentioning when the Federation of Hungarian Women's Associations voted unanimously to form a women's suffrage department. With this, every piece got in place to fight with all-out effort for women's equality and suffrage. World War I generated a promising situation for women, because men were enlisted in the army, and due to that, women had to supply tasks they never did before to maintain the wartime economy and support men in the field. They proved their same strength and necessity in society as men's. After World War I, it involved extraordinary changes.²⁶

²² SZAPOR, Judith: *Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War. From Rights to Revanche*. London, 2018, Bloomsbury, p. 26.

²³ KOLLONAY-LEHOCZKY, Csilla: Development Defined by Paradoxes: Hungarian History and Female Suffrage. In: RODRIGUEZ-RUIZ, Blanca – RUBIO-MARÍN, Ruth (eds.): *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe. Voting to Become Citizens*. Leiden/Boston, 2012, Brill.

²⁴ KERESZTY, Orsolya: A Nő és a Társadalom című folyóirat (1907–1913) működésének történetéhez [The history of the journal *Woman and Society* (1907-1913)]. *Magyar Könyvszemle [Hungarian Book Review]*, 2012, vol. 128., no. 3., pp. 334–351.

²⁵ LEHOTAI, Orsolya: A nők választójogát és képviselőtét övező diskurzus az 1945-ös választások tükrében [The discourse surrounding women's suffrage and representation in the 1945 elections]. *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat [Social Gender Studies Interdisciplinary eJournal]*, 2014, vol. 4, no. 2., p. 91.

²⁶ MÁDAY, *op. cit.*, pp 175–181.

4. The big turn and its effects and then its “fulfilment”

The last era in question was between 1918 and 1945, when all the efforts for women’s suffrage were accomplished.²⁷ On December 21, 1917 minister Vilmos Vázsonyi did the first step with submitting a bill about giving suffrage for women, although bound to severe restrictions. During the parliamentary debate, he took the floor several times and emphasized the importance of expanding suffrage for women due to their altered situation and role in society during the World War I. Despite this, the Wekerle-government disregarded the bill and passed Act 17 of 1918, which put suffrage on another basis and entirely omitted women. Nonetheless, October 31, 1918 meant a landmark when the victory of the civil revolution was achieved, and the Károlyi-government came to power. The new government passed Act I of 1918,²⁸ which finally assured suffrage for women bounded to writing and reading knowledge, reaching the age of twenty-four years, and having Hungarian citizenship for six years. Afterwards, in the era of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the age limit was decreased to eighteen years. The first election where women took part was in April of 1919. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the Friedrich-government was set up and changed the criteria of voting in the Decree No. 5985 on November 17, 1919.²⁹ The criteria were the same for both women and men, except a particular stipulation for women, which was the knowledge of writing and reading. With this decree, the suffrage of women was getting on to complete equality with men, but there were still some disadvantages.³⁰

²⁷ An interesting comparison amongst new woman, modern girl and postwar girl see: SIPOS, Balázs: *Modern amerikai lány, új nő és magyar asszony a Horthy-korban. Egy nőtörténelmi szempontú médiatörténelmi vizsgálat. [Modern American girl, new woman and Hungarian woman in the Horthy era. A media history study from a women's history perspective]. Századok [Centuries], 2014, vol. 148., no. 1., pp. 3–34.*

²⁸ AMBRUS ATTILA JÓZSEFNÉ KÉRI, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²⁹ SIMÁNDI, Irén: *Küzdelem a nők parlamenti választójogáért Magyarországon 1848–1938 [The struggle for women's suffrage in Hungary 1848–1938]*. Budapest, 2009, Gondolat Kiadó, p. 150., 157.

³⁰ BÓDINÉ BELIZNAI – KÉPES, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

Minister Kunó Klebelsberg submitted the new Electoral Statute on January 27, 1922, which showed regression in the aspect of equal suffrage: it bounded women's suffrage to stricter conditions. Despite these setbacks, Margit Slachta, a prominent woman in the era, by using her passive suffrage, became the first female MP. She pulled up the bill of Klebelsberg for the differences between women's and men's suffrage. Eventually, the bill did not become an act, mostly because of the lack of time, but also because of the opposing voices.

In the same year, PM István Bethlen released the Prime Ministerial Order No. 2200/1922 that bound to new conditions the entitlement of suffrage for both men and women. Later, this Order was forced into law on the July 7, 1925. With this Prime Ministerial Order, women got into a more promising situation, even so, fewer of them were able to vote, as the educational attainment was raised from four years to six. The secret voting based on proportional system also appeared here for the first time, a keystone of the recent voting requirements. Following all this, Anna Kéthly was elected to an MP within the confines of a by-election.

On May 5, 1938, the Parliament accepted the bill of PM Kálmán Darányi and the Minister of Interior József Széll about the method of election, which needed to be secret and compulsory. However, women's suffrage was still bounded to stricter conditions. According to Anna Kéthly, it was not the goal to determine who has suffrage, but who has not. For this reason, this rate was much higher among women, who did not fit in the principle of civil equality. After World War II, the final turn eventuated because of the Soviet takeover. The Act 8 of 1945 pronounced that suffrage is secret, universal, and equal and determined the age limit in twenty years for both women and men. Herewith the women's fight for suffrage was completed. Several fantastic women fought it with inexhaustible energies for more than two centuries and step-by-step they succeeded to reach their goal and win in this social battle for their suffrage.³¹

³¹ SIMÁNDI, *op. cit.*

5. Conclusion

In the article, I presented that women's willpower can reach many things, especially if more of them unite. In almost two centuries, from the complete repression by men, women achieved to be treated almost equally with men both constitutionally and socially. Women usually had to work for everything twice as hard as men, to whom suffrage is natural, and this proves genuinely the strength of women in the past, in the present and hopefully in the future. They recklessly stood against a male-centred world, and with unbeatable endurance, they achieved their goal, which was suffrage in this instance. Nevertheless, achieving suffrage was not only important from a constitutional aspect, thus women could take part in the political life in appropriate ways, but also women stepped out from the full serving of men and got appreciation world-wide as strong, independent women. The title of my article doubts the phrase that '*behind every great man there's a great woman*' because women are not standing behind men, but beside them. For me the conclusion of this research is that a woman can achieve everything with enough endurance, however it seems impossible, and the above-mentioned renowned women serve as good examples in many respect.