

THE DEBATE ON PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS IN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN HUNGARY, 1908-1918

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By the turn of the 20th century the issue of women's suffrage rights in Hungary had become a widely discussed issue in political life. The electoral law at that time had been rather exclusive and guaranteed rights only for citizens of high social status.

Earlier in Hungarian law¹ women with large real estate property could participate in local elections by sending an authorized (male) representative instead of themselves, but women could not be elected.

Even though progressive movements, including feminists made several attempts to bring changes and establish a new political system based on universal suffrage rights, the identical reform bills to make electoral rights wider had all been rejected by Parliament until 1918. According to the law passed in 1918, as the first law accepted by the Autumn (Democratic) Revolution, literate women above the age of 24 were granted suffrage right. In the spring of 1919 a new political turn swept away these regulations and the Hungarian Soviet Republic introduced universal rights to vote but linked the exercise of those rights with trade union membership, so 'non-proletars' were excluded from the elections². After the brief era of the Soviet commune, ending in autumn 1919, the new right-wing rule that defined the following decades, overturned the regulations and restricted electoral rights and connected it to the census (according to age, literacy, property or family status). Universal suffrage

¹ Law 1886, Article XXII.

² Andrea Pető and Judit Szapor. "A női esélyegyenlőségre vonatkozó női felfogás hatása a magyar választójogi gondolkodásra 1848-1990". Az „állam érdekében adományozott jog” feminista megközelítésben. In *Befogadás és eredetiség a jogban és a jogtudományban. Adalékok a magyarországi jog természetrajzához*. Edited by Sajó András, 136–175. Recepció és kreativitás. Nyitott magyar kultúra sorozat. (Budapest: Áron, 2004), 143.

rights were introduced in Hungary only after the Second World War in 1945.

In searching for the reasons why the reform bills on women's political rights were rejected in the 1910's, this article takes into consideration the structure of society, outlines the political decision-making process, briefly introduces the movements for voting rights and offers a close reading of the debates in Parliament on reform bills to understand the delay of the reforms. The period before the First World War is otherwise often referred to as the 'golden age' of modernising and developing democratisation in society with an upsurge of civil society movements before the First World War. Thus it was to be expected that the petition about women's suffrage in 1907 by the Association of Feminists (founded in Budapest in 1904 as part of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance) might be received more positively than it was. The contemporary arguments of the parliamentary debate provide an understanding of why and exactly how the reform bills were rejected postponing the enactment of women's political rights in Hungary.

The Hungarian Parliamentary System during the Habsburg Monarchy

Hungary was part of the Habsburg Monarchy, being in so-called personal union with Austria, meaning that it had a common ruler, the Emperor, who was at the same time crowned as the king of Hungary. The Habsburg Monarchy had a peculiar social and political structure³.

Politics was defined by the structure of the so-called dualist system. Both Hungary and Austria had their identical Parliaments. The Hungarian National Assembly held its sessions in Budapest. In matters of foreign policy, finance and defence Hungary did not have the right to decide on her own as there were 'common ministries' for these matters. Hungarian national interests could not be expressed directly in the Monarchy's imperial foreign policy.⁴

Society was characterized by a multi-national population of 35 million with modernist and feudal values in great variety. The development of capitalism fused the Monarchy into an economic unit even though the population belonged to different nations and nationalities.⁵

³ Ferenc Mucsi, *Magyarország története 1890-1914*. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1978), 166.

⁴ István Diószegi, *Hungarians in the Ballhausplatz. Studies on the Austro-Hungarian Common Foreign Policy*. (Budapest: Corvina, 1983), 7.

⁵ Diószegi 1983, 23.

After a period of political repression (1850's-60'), following the failed Hungarian revolution and war for independence in 1848-49, the Compromise (1876) was signed with the Habsburg Emperor regulating the connection of the two countries. Yet in Hungarian political life this agreement was judged by contradictory perspectives. And the judgment of the Compromise had a special significance in the formation of political forces and in the content of the policies of the political parties. In fact in party politics the main dividing line ran between those accepting and those opposing the system of dualism, the regulated personal union with the Habsburgs.⁶

When describing political parties in Hungary, it must be pointed out that although these parties were named after the political trends of the era, such as conservative, liberal, democratic, radical, socialist, labour, yet the content of their philosophies was often different from what could have been expected on the basis their names⁷. The basic issues and policies of the different parties were not necessarily similar to those of the same name in the western democracies. Even fifty years after the lost freedom war in 1848-9 and more than twenty after the Compromise made with the Emperor in 1867, the dividing line between political forces in Hungary was still their identical attitude towards the Habsburg ruler. The strongest party in the National Assembly was the Liberal Party (*Szabadelvű Párt*, formed in 1875). It followed the principles of the Compromise, that is, the pact with the Habsburgs aiming to consolidate Hungary and Austria. The Liberal Party was thus loyal to the Monarchy yet insisted on Hungary's separate status within the frameworks of the Monarchy. It aimed at full independence in home affairs (but accepted the remaining common issues in foreign affairs and defence). Kálmán Tisza, (1830 – 1902) a prominent politician of the age was the leader of this party, and became the prime minister. The Liberal Party governed the country for three decades. However, Kálmán Tisza had to resign in 1890 as a consequence of losing his popularity. One of the reasons for his failure was his loyalty to the Emperor Franz Joseph. The party faced a crisis and dissolved in 1906 to reform in 1910 under the name National Labour Party.⁸

The second strongest party supporting Tisza's side was the National Party, established by the Earl Apponyi in 1892.⁹ It was followed by the Catholic People's Party (Katolikus Néppárt), formed in 1895.

⁶ Diószegi 1983, 261.

⁷ Diószegi 1983, 260.

⁸ Mucsi 1978, 53.

⁹ Mucsi 1978, 68.

Parties in the opposition were: the Independence Kossuth Party (*Függetlenségi Kossuth Párt*), the 1848 Party, the Democratic Party (*Polgári Demokrata Párt*) formed in 1901, and the Radical Party (*Radikális Párt*) established later in 1914. The Social Democratic Party had no seats in Parliament even though it had a relatively significant party membership and some political influence.

The main feature of the Hungarian opposition parties was the non-recognition of the Compromise, that is, the system of dualism. These political forces refused this form of coexistence with the Habsburgs. The opposition (led by the Independence Party) therefore did not accept the coalition with the Habsburgs. The Independence and the '48 Party accepted only the idea of a common ruler, but wanted independent ministries of defence, foreign affairs and finance.

The parties were very close, however, in their attachment to classical liberal values, meaning for them mostly economic, political mercantilism. The Moderates, (accepting the personal union), had an agrarian programme.

Hungarian political life was mostly preoccupied with the constitutional question: the principles of 1848, the Hungarian war of independence, or those of 1867, the Compromise with the Habsburgs. Parliamentary delegations (with members of the Habsburg delegations) met annually. In these years political storms characterized the Hungarian parliamentary democracy. In the National Assembly there had been a limiting of the methods (e.g. obstruction) of the opposition, in November 1904.¹⁰ Because of the difficulties and fierce conflicts in January 1905 the king dissolved the National Assembly. A year later in 1906 after the elections in January the Independence Party gained strength and became able to form the government. This was followed by political upheavals in the country. Ultimately a coalition government was formed and Sándor Wekerle, (1848–1921) formerly minister of finance, was appointed prime minister, mostly because of his loyalty.

Four years later, in 1910, the National Labour Party won the elections. It placed the fight for universal suffrage at the centre of its activities and sought allies among extra-parliamentary forces.¹¹

At the time the 'restrictions of voting rights greatly limited the parliamentary activity'.¹² Rights were defined by census; electors were

¹⁰ Sándor Balogh, Gergely Jenő, Izsák Lajos, Jakab Sándor, Pritz Pál & Romsics Ignác eds *Magyarország a XX. Században* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1985), 20.

¹¹ Diószegi, *Hungarians in the Ballhausplatz. Studies on the Austro-Hungarian Common Foreign Policy* (Budapest: Corvina, 1983), 270.

¹² Diószegi 1983, 261.

qualified by property and education. The election law had been passed back in 1848 as part of the social and political reforms. It granted suffrage to men above the age 20 who were Hungarian residents having property or education. The property requirements were the following: in towns having a family house of at least three rooms, in rural areas: land of 32 Korona¹³ with an annual tax, or equivalent of 8-10 *hold*¹⁴ estate, (depending on the region, as values of land varied) or an annual income over 1000 Korona (500 forint) (traders, craftsmen etc). The alternative requirement was higher education. Those who having no property but who were intellectuals were given the right to vote (e.g. members of academy, artists, scientists, professors, lawyers, priests, educators in nursery schools, engineers, sergeants, pharmacists furthermore those holding a diploma in agriculture and mining). Noblemen also had the right to vote. The titles were hereditary or conferred by the rulers. Apprentices, servants and domestic servants were excluded from voting rights.

Women's Organisations and the Struggle for the Right to Vote

The earliest documented petition about Hungarian women's claim to participate in political life was a Petition of 1790 in which noble women expressed their wish to participate as passive observers at the National Assembly.¹⁵ The petition was written in the name of 'mothers'. The reasoning for their participation was that being more informed and knowledgeable about the main debates and issues they could be their husbands' partners in their efforts to work for the nation's interests and that as mothers they could educate their sons better in a patriotic manner. Their claim was therefore not based on an individualistic argument but they wanted to gain the rights to participate for the sake of the community, the nation.

The movement for women's education and participation in public life became stronger from the mid-19th century. The movement was part of the national struggle for independence and to a certain extent enjoyed the support of Reform Party politicians, as the development in women's education was believed to contribute to the improvement of the Hungarian national culture and the mother tongue. Associations and institutions were

¹³ Hungarian currency at the time.

¹⁴ Hold is a unit of measurement of lands. 1hold = 0,57 hectares or 1,42 English acres.

¹⁵ 'Az magyar anyáknak alázatos kérések..' Bárány Péter, 1790.

formed. Such as the first secondary grammar school for girls founded by Hermin Beniczky, Pálné Veres. This was also the time when Teréz Karacs founded the first child care centre. The initiatives were mostly carried out by women of the middle and upper classes.¹⁶

From the turn of the century on vocational schools and courses were established for women (in the fields of e.g. sewing, teacher training, and commerce: accountancy, book-keeping, clerical work, official correspondence, etc). After completing these schools women were given permission to work.

By that time 800 women's organisations were claimed to exist throughout the country.¹⁷ Most of these were religious or charity groups and traditional local women's clubs. Very few of the women's groups articulated political claims. The charity groups, like for example the first reported women's organisation, the Women's Charity Organisation (*Pesti Jótékony Nőegylet*), founded in 1817 in Pest did not challenge the prevailing patriarchal values and gender roles.

The organisation of white-collar women workers, the National Federation of Women Clerical Workers (*Nőtisztviselők Országos Szövetsége*) was one of the earliest feminist initiatives. The Federation was founded by Rózsa Schwimmer (who later became the leading figure of feminism and pacifism in Hungary) in 1897. The organisation was important to defend employed women's interests by helping them with the exchange of information and giving them moral support.¹⁸

In 1895 a law prepared by the Minister of Education was passed allowing women to attend universities, yet not all faculties, and limiting their rights to three faculties, that is: humanities, medicine and pharmacy¹⁹

The first proposal by an MP about women's right to vote was presented by István Majoros in July 1874.²⁰ He recommended that educated women should be given the vote. However, he stresses that women's traditional responsibilities should not be changed. At that time

¹⁶ On women's movements for education see: Nagyné, Szegvári Katalin. *A nők művelődési jogaiért folytatott harc hazánkban 1777-1918* (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1969).

¹⁷ See Gergely Janka, "A feminizmus története" Manuscript. Hungarian National Archive. P999. 19.cs. 33.

¹⁸ See also earlier publications on women's movements: Acsády (2004, 2007)

¹⁹ Szegvári Katalin Nagyné. *Út a nők egyenjogúságához*. (Budapest: Magyar Nők Országos Tanácsa. Kossuth Könyvkiadó 1981), 133.

²⁰ It was the debate of the 34th law.

there was hardly anyone in Parliament supporting the proposal for women's rights²¹, so the proposal was not accepted.

In 1903 the Social Democratic Party in its programme claimed universal rights to vote both for women and men. The most significant campaigner for suffrage rights, the Association of Feminists, was established in 1904 in Budapest as the Hungarian section of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance.²² The Association had local groups in 28 towns all over the country. The feminists aimed to achieve equality for women in every sphere of life as well as to guarantee the right of women to work and 'create nation-wide feminist clubs, running discussions and public lectures, publishing books concerning feminism and founding a journal'.²³ They considered political rights a tool to achieve equality. Their periodical, *Nő és társadalom* (Woman and Society) which also included the bulletin of the National Federation of Women Clerical Workers first came out in 1907 and was published regularly (monthly) until the First World War. In 1914 the journal was renamed: *A Nő* (The Woman) and appeared in a different layout with a change in the emphasis of its content: primarily campaigning radically against the war.²⁴ The Association considered itself independent of the political parties. Its political language was rather different from the mainstream contemporary politics in Hungary, preoccupied with the problems surrounding the Compromise with the Habsburgs. The feminists did not explicitly take sides in the debate in 1848 or 1867. However, the Association had its supporters among diverse political circles. The few politicians and famous personalities of contemporary public life who supported women's suffrage were mostly connected to progressive circles. Among their allies we can find the so-called 'middle-class radicals' (*Polgári radikálisok*) and progressive intellectual groups who influenced the feminists and had firm contact with them. As a result of this circle of democrats, the radicals and intellectuals, led by a group of lawyers formulated the Men's League for Women's Suffrage Rights in Budapest in 1911.

The significance of the Hungarian feminist movement can be illustrated by the fact that in 1913 the seventh conference of the

²¹ Nagyné 1981, 137.

²² The activity of the Association has interested several researchers recently. See the publications of: Ágnes Horváth, Katalin Nagyné Szegvári, Irén Elekes, Claudia Papp, Andrea Pető, Zimmermann Susan, Judit Acsády

²³ *Tájékoztató a Feministák Egyesületének céljairól és munkatervéről.* (Budapest, 1905)

²⁴ The author of this article has published articles earlier about the activities and the values of the Feminist Association and their journal.

International Woman's Suffrage Alliance was held in Budapest.²⁵ As expressed in that congress, the feminists hoped that once women had the franchise it would save society from wars. Bédy-Schwimmer in her articles back in 1912 had already drawn attention to the impending threat of coming war.²⁶ During the First World War Hungarian feminists took pacifist initiatives. Among their numerous activities they campaigned, helped war widows and ran an employment agency for women.²⁷

Even though from their founding their organization on the feminists in Hungary kept arguing for general rights to vote as a part of their political program of women's social emancipation, they faced a dilemma. As the organisation was part of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance it had to accept its premises, claiming women's rights have to be equal with men's rights in any given country. Therefore as men also had limited rights in Hungary at the turn of the century, as a first step the suffragists' claim had to be the claim for the same rights for women.²⁸

Women's Suffrage and the Debate on Electoral Bills

The first proposal, the first civil initiative by feminists to the legislative power to extend suffrage rights for women was handed in to the National Assembly in 1907.

The procedure of having any answer for the petition was rather slow. This was partly due to the habitually lengthy debating process. It was very long and complicated.

On 8th May 1907 the Feminist Association and the National Federation of Women Clerical Workers submitted their proposal on women's rights to the National Assembly.²⁹ It addressed the MPs in the following way:

²⁵ The event is well documented in the daily papers, the monthly publication of the feminists, *Nő és a társadalom* [Woman and Society], and can also be traced in the archive material of the Association (correspondence, minutes of gatherings etc.) in the Hungarian National Archive. MOL. P999. Feministák Egyesülete

²⁶ Kereszty, Orsolya. "Bédy-Schwimmer Rózsa, a Nő és Társadalom szerkesztője" In *Házastárs? Munkatárs? Vetélytárs? A női szerepek változása a 20. Századi Magyarországon* edited by Mária Palasik & Balázs Sipos, 86-195. (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 191.

²⁷ Judit Acsády. "In a Different Voice. Responses of Hungarian Feminism to the First World War" In *The Women's Movement in Wartime: International Perspective 1914-1919*, edited by Alison Fell and Ingrid Sharp (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105-123.

²⁸ Nagyné Szegvári 1981, 87.

²⁹ The leaflet was originally published in 1905. (see Primary Sources: *Az országgyűlési...1905*).

Dear House of Representatives! We believe the only just form of electoral rights is universal rights. Therefore we apply to the House to introduce the same rights for Hungarian women and men.³⁰

The arguments of the petition were mostly based on the principles of social justice. It assumed that women's contribution to politics was in the interest of all and society as a whole will benefit from women's inclusion into politics. In this sense their argument was similar to the petition of Hungarian mothers of 1790.

Furthermore, the Feminists stated the following: those citizens who have legal responsibilities and pay taxes also deserve rights in making decisions. Equality of Hungarian citizens before the law has been guaranteed since 1868, yet electoral rights are not given equally to everyone.

The feminists believed - as it is expressed in the petition - 'that the exclusion of women from political rights was based on the prejudices of a thousand years and it was unjust. It underestimated women and suggested that they are not citizens of the same value as men. Men are found more responsible and morally more trustworthy (by being given right to vote) even if young, uneducated and without family responsibilities, or are ex-criminals.' Feminist also criticized the fact that 75% of men were still without electoral rights.³¹

Again on the basis of the principle of social justice the Association finds it unfair that: 'men have had the privilege to run the affairs of state so far. Women are capable of taking their part and showing another way of running these affairs once they are given the chance'.

The petition presented a brief history of struggles for women's rights, starting with the example of England, from 1832, when the first proposal on this matter was presented to the House of Commons in England, and mentioning J. S. Mill. The petition referred to further supporters of suffrage rights in different countries and states, such as New Zealand, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, etc. where women already gained rights by that time. They mentioned further examples of the extension of voting rights: in Sweden, Norway and Iceland those women who paid taxes had the right to vote. In Austria since 1873 women of the aristocracy with large estates and above the age of 24 had had the right to vote.

³⁰ Translated from the Hungarian original: *Hitünk és meggyőződésünk szerint igazságosan csakis az általános titkos választójog alapján szabályozható... a magyar nőket a magyar férfiakkal mindenben egyenlő választójoggal felruházni /méltoztassék/ Az országgyűlési választójognak a nőkre való kiterjesztése, 3.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

In the last part of the petition the feminists made an attempt to give answers to the most common arguments against women's suffrage.

The reconstruction of the process of the discussion of this reform bill according to the minutes noted during the sessions of Parliament shows that the debate and the voting were delayed for an extremely long period. On 13 May 1907, a few days after the petition had been handed in, the head of the committee responsible for the preparations of proposals for parliamentary debates presented it to the National Assembly without referring to the title or the content of this proposal. At the same time he asked permission to print it (so that it could be available to all the Members of Parliament for consideration).³² It was also suggested that after the distribution, the proposal should be put on the agenda. The speaker of the House confirmed the presentation and assured that proposal No. 30 would be printed out, put on the agenda and be discussed.

Several months passed. On 6th July the official responsible in the National Assembly read out the title of the proposal: 'Proposals of the National Federation of Women Clerical Workers and the Feminist Association on the subject of the extension of suffrage rights for women.' Yet, when the floor was given again to the head of the committee instead of to the discussion itself, he suggested that at this point the proposal should be handed to the Minister of Home Affairs personally and not debated by the House in its present form. The suggestion was not justified by referring to mistakes either of the form or the content of the petition. No explanation was given.³³ Thus the debate on suffrage rights was postponed again for more than another year. In mid 1908 several representatives urged the Minister, Gyula Andrásy to finalise the Bill on the Reform on Electoral Rights and make it ready for the debate. He excused himself and promised in May, that after the summer holidays in the beginning of the autumn session of Parliament he would prepare the petition. A large number of Members of Parliament loudly expressed their consent to the delay of the debate. 'Yes, we agree! That is right'- they shouted.³⁴ At the same session, a representative from the opposition was booed by a large number of Members of Parliament when he questioned the Minister's responsibility about the unreformed electoral rights. He reminded his fellow Members of Parliament about the excluded masses of

³² *Az 1910 évi június 21-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 1907. IX, 103.

³³ *Országgyűlési Napló*, 1907. XII, 50.

³⁴ *Országgyűlési Napló*, 1908, 273.

voters in the country. Merely because he mentioned this several people from the government side shouted loudly that he was a rebel.³⁵

According to the testimony of the emotional expressions recorded in the minutes it seems that very strong interests defended the old electoral law, namely the exclusion of a large part of the adult population from political rights. Also, the delaying of the process on the debate of the proposal served the interests of those who wanted to delay or avoid changes in the electoral system.

On 11th November 1908 at the same time as the long-awaited proposal of Minister of Home Affairs, a group of 17 other representatives handed in their own alternative proposals to reform the electoral rights. When the Minister, Gyula Andrásy was about to present his proposal several members of parliament jumped up from their seats and made noises and loud insinuating remarks.

'Hereby I present my principles concerning electoral rights...' - the Minister, Andrásy started his speech, but could not finish his sentence because he was suddenly interrupted by an ironic voice from the seats of representatives of the opposition. A few minutes later when the Minister was about to explain the details of his proposal his words could hardly be heard according to the keeper of the minutes of the parliamentary session. The speaker had to ring his bell to silence the representatives.³⁶

Finally when the Minister, Andrásy was able to resume his speech, he argued that individual political rights and the general interest of the nation were in contrast. He stated that it was not in the interest of the political power to extend the rights as it might be against the nation's interest as a whole. He considered universal suffrage rights to be utopia. According to Andrásy, society must be saved from extremists (i.e. socialists) and unpatriotic elements (the representatives of ethnic minorities, or different nationalities) who might win a majority in the National Assembly if electoral rights were granted to the masses. Again, he stressed that it was not in the interest of the nation.

The Minister's vehement argumentation against the extension of political rights was followed by shouting in the House of Representatives. He was called feudalistic and absolutistic by the members of the opposition.³⁷

However, Andrásy continued his speech by stating that democratic practices were missing from the Hungarian population (being backward economically and socially mostly because of earlier wars and defeats).

³⁵ *Országgyűlési Napló*, 1908, 274.

³⁶ *Országgyűlési Napló* 1908 XXI, 31.

³⁷ *Országgyűlési Napló* 1908 XXI, 31-2.

People were not educated; it would be risky to give electoral rights to ignorant people. (He argued that illiterate people should not have political rights, and nor should those who do not speak/write/read Hungarian). These people should be represented by someone else.

At the end of the session the Speaker proposed that the Andrassy bill be copied in the customary way and distributed among the representatives for further debate.

The Andrassy Reform Bill in its final form in did not become very popular even though it was so long in the preparatory stage. It was not constructed on the notion of universal suffrage but on eligibility. (It proposed that all literate men above the age of 24, those above the age of 32 or having three children, who had completed secondary education and who paid a certain amount of tax be given two votes.) Therefore it was already unacceptable to those proposing universal rights. The bill was not supported by many and thus it was dropped from the agenda of the Parliament.

Besides submitting their petition to the National Assembly the feminists tried other methods of agitation, too. In 1906 they had distributed posters and spread leaflets all over the country, as Rózsa Schwimmer reported at the International Suffrage Conference in the Hague in 1906.³⁸ In October 1907 in one of the largest city halls, the 'Vigadó' in Budapest, a crowd of 6000 turned up to join the public meeting organized by the Feminist Association about suffrage rights. Thousands of women from different social classes followed their street demonstrations in 1907 and 1910. In 1913 the 7th Conference of the International Suffrage Alliance was held in Budapest. The best known suffragettes from all over the world attended. The conference received extensive media coverage by the Hungarian press. The issue of women's rights to vote seemed to become better known and accepted by the public. Yet in Parliament this issue was not on the table again for a long time.

Initiatives during the War

Ever since the beginning of the First World War the Feminist Association in Budapest expressed a pacifist point of view. Besides the social work to help victims of war, widows and orphans, they kept campaigning for peace and stressed the importance of women's political rights.

³⁸ Rózsa Schwimmer, Hungary. Report prepared and read by Rosika Schwimmer, delagate, Feministák Egyesülete." (Copenhagen: Third International Suffrage Conference, 1906), 85-87.

The question of women's suffrage received a new context in the war. In their journal, *A Nő* (The Woman) the Association presented the idea that women's suffrage could be an instrument to reduce militarism, make governments stop the war and avoid violent international conflicts in the future³⁹. This point of view was shared by the MP, Sándor Giesswien⁴⁰, yet anti-war efforts were very weak in Hungarian political life at that time. In his speech of 9th Dec 1915, Giesswien suggested reforming the election law by diminishing discrimination against women⁴¹ and even though some of the Members of Parliament agreed with the suffragist point of view, the attempts to pass the Reform Bill on the election law were again refused by the Hungarian parliament.

In the third year of the war, in 1917, a Suffrage Block (*Választójogi Blokk*) was formed of the representatives of two parliamentary parties, the Independence and '48 Party led by Mihály Károlyi and the Radical Party.⁴² They were supported mostly by progressive intellectuals from the middle class and aristocracy. The Suffrage Block also included extra-parliamentary forces, several social groups besides the feminists. In foreign policy it aimed to work for the ending of the war and make an earliest possible peace, while in home affairs it proposed reforms in the country, including the extension of electoral rights.

In July 1918 the Assembly was again approached and the question as to when women's rights would be discussed and reforms were urged by representatives.⁴³

Following this request several reform bills were brought to discussion. One of these was presented by Vilmos Vázsonyi, who was in favour of extending rights but connecting these to education or marital status. In fact, he developed his proposal in the sense that women's rights should be similar to men's with the same restrictions.⁴⁴ Calculations started among the members of the National Assembly. According to the contemporary statistics about 260,000 or 300,000 women could have gained the right to vote depending on which version was accepted.⁴⁵ However, the question

³⁹ Acsády 2007, 105-123.

⁴⁰ Giesswien, Sándor was a priest and a politician, representing the Christian-socialist point of view. He supported 'moderate' feminisms and for example expressed in his article: "Pacifizmus és feminizmus" (Pacifism and feminism) *A Nő* (The woman. Feminist journal) Vol. I. 1914./10, 198.

⁴¹ Nagyné Szegvári 1981, 138.

⁴² Nagyné Szegvári 1981, 135.

⁴³ *Az 1918 évi július 12-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 166

⁴⁴ In this sense Vázsonyi proposal was similar to the IWSA point of view.

⁴⁵ Nagyné Szegvári 1981, 139.

was from which social class the potential voters would be from and which party would these women vote for. Obviously none of the parties wanted to diminish their own support.

The same year the Feminist Association announced a new campaign with public meetings, demonstrations, pamphleteering, petitions and personal lobbying of politicians from different parties.

As both foreign and domestic pressure from democratic forces urged it, suffrage was discussed again. In July 1918 the prime minister Sándor Wekerle, announced his own proposal agreeing in theory with women's right to vote, yet with conditions regarding education, wealth, marital status and employment. In the debate when another representative was given the floor, he referred to the feminists' petitions that filled him with anger and said that their point of view was unacceptable, yet, he claimed that women's right to vote must be accepted but only with restrictions.⁴⁶

Later in the debate those who supported women's rights based their argument on the assumption that women's inclusion in political rights would promote their charity and social work.

Among the concerns, besides the practical calculations as to which party would gain and which would lose seats in Parliament, there were concerns of family affairs. 'What if husband and wife vote for different parties? Politics should not be a source of marital conflicts.'⁴⁷ Others were likewise concerned that women might easily fall victims of agitation (like pacifism) and therefore it was not a good idea to give them the vote. The concluding argument was the following: 'electoral rights are not the innate rights of individuals. Legislation can confer them on those who merit such rights to practice their rights and responsibilities'.

Finally after the debate when the question was put to the final vote, 233 representatives out of the total number of 410 did not vote, which shows that less than half of them were present in the National Assembly that day. By those who were present all modifications of the election bill were rejected. At the end of the vote the Chair announced: '... the Assembly has rejected all proposals concerning women's rights to vote'.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The initiatives for the reform of electoral rights failed even though the debate in the Hungarian Parliament went on for more than a decade. The case of women's suffrage at that time could not be separated from the

⁴⁶ *Az 1918 évi július 12-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 492.

⁴⁷ *Az 1918 évi július 12-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 543.

⁴⁸ *Az 1918 évi július 12-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 550.

issue of the extension of men's rights. As these rights had been rather limited at the turn of the century, being last regulated in 1848, the introduction of universal suffrage would have enlarged the electorate by almost 9/10. This was the main concern of the political decision-makers in the National Assembly. It seems the good cause of universal suffrage rights extended to both men and women was for a long time subject to calculations and party politics of those aiming to stay in power and not lose official positions and Parliamentary seats.

In 1908 after the first petition had been presented by the suffragettes, the arguments in it were not even discussed in depth. Later, when towards the end of the war in 1917 and in 1918 more political forces were interested in the extension of rights the issue was paid more attention in the National Assembly. Several reform bills were presented for discussion. During the debates representatives mobilized the ideological and stereotypical arguments of the age about gender roles, about women's and men's responsibilities in society and private life. After the detailed debate it seemed that most of the representatives were in favour of the reform and were convinced that these changes became inevitable. Yet, they voted against, mostly as a result of their political loyalty. The representatives were bearing in mind their own practical personal interests and bare calculations about how their Party's and their own seats might be threatened by the possible changes of the electoral system.

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