

Women as Producers of Global Historical Knowledge

Women's Suffrage in the Periphery of the Russian Empire, the Grand Duchy of Finland, 1890s–1910s

Abstract: In 1907 the Grand Duchy of Finland of the Russian Empire became the first state in the world to elect women to its national parliament. This paper explores an overlooked part of the process that led to Finnish women attaining full suffrage, which is their own agency in the production of knowledge arguing for universal suffrage in the conjuncture of local intra-imperial and global inter-imperial politics and circuits of knowledge. In the process, Finnish women activists from across the political spectrum developed a particular theory of history and progress, a theory that ran against the grain of patriarchal sovereign power, metropolitan democracy, and incrementalist and teleological understandings of progress. It tied the argument for full women's suffrage to the global position of the grand ducal state and the so-called Finnish Question. The concept of democratization that emerged from the theorization of Finnish women's activists dissociates and undermines earlier, more unequal forms of democracy. Building on previous literature on the international dimension of suffrage activism in Finland, I argue that the role of these women as producers of global historical knowledge is an integral part of explaining democratization in Finland in 1905/06.

Keywords: Grand Duchy of Finland, women's suffrage, intra- and inter-imperial, global knowledge production, democratization

1. Introduction

This paper explores the global context of the introduction of women's suffrage in the periphery of the Russian Empire, the Grand Duchy of Finland, in the years 1905–

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07¹ from the perspective of women as producers of knowledge. In the Grand Duchy, women across the political spectrum developed an understanding of historical progress and national struggle for full suffrage that effectively countered alternative views that would have supported more incremental democratization. To show this, the focus is on the knowledge produced between local and transnational – or rather, in terms of the global politics of the time, intra- and inter-imperial – relations that supported it. Indeed, as historian Tiina Kinnunen has pointed out, drawing on the works of Glenda Sluga, “this history was as much about internationalism as imperialism and nationalism”²

Overall, democratization and women’s suffrage in the periphery³ of the Russian Empire presented a puzzle for global politics at the time. As sociologist John Markoff has pointed out, “women’s suffrage was pioneered in lesser places in the geography of wealth and power and then advanced to more central locations”⁴ This paper expands on Markoff’s observation by showing how, in the case of the Grand Duchy, global politics was mobilized by actors in the periphery to achieve this.⁵

I would like to highlight two reasons why this case is particularly interesting in terms of women as producers of knowledge. First, the idea of non-sovereign, peripheral democratization called for a particular form of entangled political and epistemic practices. It allowed for a form of political claim-making that ran counter to established patriarchal, imperial, and metropolitan sovereignty – not along the grain of power, as the story of democracy in Atlantic empires would have it – and opened up an inclusive space for knowledge-producing women to support and argue for a progressive political agenda as integral to the Grand Duchy’s position in global relations. Second, this development required and mobilized a global and transnational context of epistemic practices, transcending periphery-metropole relations and contrasting inter-imperial civilizational thinking against intra-imperial colonial state power relations.

1 Full active and passive women’s suffrage in Finland was signed into law by the Tsar on 20 June 1906. In 1907 Finnish women were the first women in Europe to be allowed to vote and stand for election: 19 women were elected to parliament in Finland’s first parliamentary elections on 15/16 March 1907.

2 Tiina Kinnunen, *Progress, Nation and Great Women in Constructing the Idea of Feminist Internationalism*, in: Pasi Ihalainen/Antero Holmila (eds.), *Nationalism and Internationalism Intertwined. A European History of Concepts beyond the Nation State*, New York 2022, 112–128, 124.

3 Before independence, the Grand Duchy of Finland was one of the poorest states in Europe and was considered a political, social, racial, civilizational, and legal periphery. It was defined a state fragment and compared to Iceland, Madagascar, and Slavonia, among others. Cf. Juho Korhonen, *Empire, Democracy, Nation, and State. Sociological Occlusions of the German and Russian Empires*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, Providence 2019.

4 John Markoff, *Margins, Centers, and Democracy. The Paradigmatic History of Women’s Suffrage*, in: *Signs* 29/1 (2003), 85–116, 90.

5 Markoff simply suggests that democratic creativity in general flourishes in the peripheries, in part because they are not considered important and are therefore left outside the concerns of the centers of power and wealth.

I discuss how these two dimensions were reflected in women as knowledge producers and as political and epistemic actors who successfully argued for an equal position to the extent that, as a consequence of these arguments, they could not be denied such a position, lest the whole democratization movement against the grain of sovereign power be undermined.

Following others, Kinnunen has highlighted that “suffrage is an example of how feminism as a combination of ideology and social networks worked simultaneously on the national and international levels”.⁶ My argument elaborates on her point about how these connections were perceived and mobilized at the time. Furthermore, in doing so, this article also specifies and adds to the work of historian Irma Sulkunen, who has argued that Finland’s non-sovereign nation-building allowed for a short-lived coincidence of combining innovative international thinking with local social development.⁷ Not only do I demonstrate how this combination was constructed and argued for by Finnish women, but by showing the depth and detail of these women’s arguments I suggest that the combination may not have been as short-lived and coincidental as Sulkunen claims.

Political demands and knowledge practices converged in this peripheral and non-sovereign struggle for democratic recognition, which nevertheless relied on and was squarely based on a global context. I argue that in this effort, though often politically divided at home, Finnish women collectively benefited from the global circulation of knowledge. This included not only transnational women’s organizations such as the International Woman’s Suffrage Alliance and socialist organizations,⁸ but beyond this, knowledge production based on a synthesis of global views for local purposes.

As Kinnunen summarizes, “not only did the encounters with like-minded activists in international surroundings arouse emotions, they were also highly instrumental in creating channels for producing and circulating feminist knowledge”.⁹ For Finnish suffragists of the pre-World War One period, nationalism and internationalism were not contradictory, but rather complementary.¹⁰ When Finnish women gained their suffrage rights in 1906, one of the most famous suffragists, Alexandra

6 Tiina Kinnunen, *The National and International in Making a Feminist. The Case of Alexandra Gripenberg*, in: *Women’s History Review* 25/4 (2016), 652–670, 657.

7 Irma Sulkunen, *Suffrage, Nation and Citizenship – The Finnish Case in an International Context*, in: Irma Sulkunen/Seija-Leena Nevala-Nurmi/Pirjo Markkola (eds.), *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship – International Perspectives on Parliamentary Reforms*, Newcastle 2009, 83–105, 97.

8 Kinnunen, *Progress*, 2022, 112–128.

9 *Ibid.*, 113.

10 See Leila J. Rupp, *Constructing Internationalism. The Case of Transnational Women’s Organizations, 1888–1945*, in: *The American Historical Review* 99/5 (1994), 1571–1600.

Gripenberg, directly thanked “sisters all over the world [...] who enabled us to gain our rights”.¹¹

I bring these different viewpoints together to answer the question of how Finnish women activists produced knowledge that successfully supported their claims for full suffrage. My main sources are the writings of Finnish female activists involved in the reform of 1905/06. This includes authors from different sides of the political divide. I provide background and comparative information through selected sources collected as part of a wider research project from various archives in Finland and globally, including some political cartoons from the period that capture certain key sentiments in a single image.

2. The intra- and inter-imperial approach

Empires like Britain and the US tended to ‘racialize’ and ‘gender’ democracy, so that the (often more progressive) democratic efforts and movements of women and peripheries were overlooked.¹² But by mobilizing an interpretation of how to relate global ideas to local politics, women knowledge producers in the Grand Duchy of Finland framed their struggles against such views and in ways that contributed to the making of what could be called the first modern democratic state, if we consider, as we should, women’s equal political participation a bare minimum for modern democracy and accept, as we should, that democratization can also take place against the grain of sovereign power.¹³ Sulkunen writes that “Finnish women were the first in Europe to gain the right to vote, and the first women in the world to be granted, without restriction, the rights to vote and run for parliament as full citizens”.¹⁴

This becomes clearer when we try to decentre retrospectively constructed historical lenses in our analytical approach, particularly those influenced by methodological nationalism or metropole- and sovereignty-centred notions of the history of

11 Alexandra Gripenberg, *The Great Victory in Finland*, 1906, quoted in Francisco O. Ramirez/Yasemin Soysal/Suzanne Shanahan, *The Changing Logic of Political Citizenship. Cross-National Acquisition of Women’s Suffrage Rights, 1890 to 1990*, in: *American Sociological Review* 62/5 (1997), 735–745, 735.

12 Korhonen, *Empire*, 2019.

13 To be sure, the situation was far from perfect. For example, as Harjula points out, people who received poor relief were excluded. To my knowledge, more research is required, especially on minority or marginalized populations in Finland at the time. See Minna Harjula, *Köyhä, kelvoton, kansalainen? Köyhäinapu yleisen äänioikeuden esteenä Suomessa* [Poor, Worthless, Citizen? Poor Relief as an Obstacle to Universal Suffrage in Finland], in: *Janus* 18/1 (2010), 4–19.

14 Irma Sulkunen, *Finland. Suffrage, Nation, and Political Mobilization*, in: Susan Franceshet/Mona Lena Krook/Netina Tan (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women’s Political Rights*, London 2019, 143–154, 144.

democracy. Especially in the case of pre-World War One Eastern European borderlands, an intra- and inter-imperial framing of historical forces can help us achieve this.¹⁵

Historiography has often retrospectively glossed over these developments as exceptional or reinterpreted them through the keyhole of later events, such as a teleological trajectory of nation-state independence or a global diffusionist view of women's suffrage after WWI,¹⁶ whereas more recently there have been calls for a new global history approach.¹⁷ Indeed, more in line with a global history approach, the case was part of an active debate about (and the making of) the social, political, and legal character of democracy and modernity worldwide. And as I want to show here, this was not an aberration, but rather a well thought-out effort by Finnish women.

Similarly, sociological research on democratization and women's suffrage overlooks the case of the Grand Duchy.¹⁸ For example, Charles Kurzman, writing on the failures of democratization during the 1905 Russian Revolution, does not include Finland nor explain its exclusion.¹⁹ In an article analyzing pathways to democracy in Europe before the First World War, Adam Bilinski offers an explanation for the exclusion. He defines the Finnish case as unapproachable within the framework of existing theories on democracy today.²⁰ Yet the process of democratization in the Grand Duchy reveals how democratic reform and women's suffrage were mobilized as tools by peripheral actors to counter and navigate imperial politics. As such, democratization was not per se linked to nation-state independence or sovereign politics.

I highlight epistemic work by women from the perspective of international connections and national struggles in the global context of empires. This approach argues against earlier interpretations that have relied on the particular(ized) role and

15 Juho Korhonen, *Why Historical Research Frameworks Matter for Sociological Methods and Decolonial Approaches? Empire and Nation Compared with Intra- and Inter-Imperiality*, in: *Sociologia* 1 (2025), 3–19.

16 Jussi Kurunmäki, *How Women's Suffrage Was Devaluated. The Burden of Analytical Categories and the Conceptual History of Democracy*, in: Kari Palonen/Jose Maria Rosales (eds.), *Parliamentarism and Democratic Theory. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Berlin 2015, 31–52.

17 See for example Pamela Paxton/Melanie M. Hughes/Jennifer L. Green, *The International Women's Movement and Women's Political Representation, 1893–2003*, in: *American Sociological Review* 71/6 (2006), 898–920; or Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston 1966, for the former and Kurunmäki, *Women's Suffrage*, 2015; or Heidemarie Winkel, *Global Historical Sociology and Connected Gender Sociologies. On the Re-Nationalization and Coloniality of Gender*, in: *InterDisciplines* 9/2 (2018), 89–134, for the latter.

18 See for example Charles Tilly, *Democracy*, Cambridge 2007.

19 Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied, 1905–1915. Intellectuals and the Fate of Democracy*, Cambridge 2008.

20 Adam Bilinski, *Paths to Democracy and Authoritarianism in Europe before World War One*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology* 31 (2018), 382–404.

position of Finnish women in relation to the form of the national and working-class movements in the country, and in relation to a limited understanding of the extent of diffusion and conscious application of international debates.²¹ In earlier interpretations, large-scale thinking around global developments and social movements, as well as abstract forms and concepts such as class and nation, have tended to gloss over this agency of women, especially as producers of knowledge. Yet individual women did debate and mobilize concepts such as development, history, empire, and gender. As researchers, we should not retrospectively claim these concepts and this large-scale thinking as the tools of our trade today, but rather start from their mobilization.

Along similar lines, sociologists Francisco O. Ramirez, Yasemin Soysal, and Suzanne Shanahan, writing about the changing patterns of women's suffrage acquisition from 1890s onwards, suggest that suffrage in Finland was a case of "an expressly international collective struggle" in contrast to "other lines of thought" that "located social change in national processes of modernization and political development, and would view acquisition of women's suffrage as a peculiarly national victory".²²

The intra- and inter-imperial approach aims to avoid such pitfalls and arises from the political considerations of the time and, as such, from empirical source materials. This should become clearer as the empirical sources are discussed. It also helps ground our analysis in global, imperial politics as they existed.²³ For example, Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatca argue that a more inter-imperial approach means retrieving previously overlooked histories and experiences of colonial and imperial situations and reinscribing them back into social theory.²⁴

Democratization, especially in the conjuncture of intra- and inter-imperial politics, allowed women to become active epistemic claim makers who then innova-

21 These arguments fall broadly into three categories: particular forms of endogenous class- and/or gender-based mobilization, long-standing cultural traditions, and local struggles for independence purely within the context of the Russian Empire. See for example Eric Blanc, *Comrades in Battle. Women Workers and the 1906 Finnish Suffrage Victory*, in: *Aspasia* 11/1 (2017), 1–18; Ruth Rubio-Marin, *The Achievement of Female Suffrage in Europe. On Women's Citizenship*, in: *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 12/1 (2014), 4–34; John Markoff, *Margins, Centers, and Democracy. The Paradigmatic History of Women's Suffrage*, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29/1 (2003), 85–116; Irma Sulkunen, *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship in Finland – A Comparative Perspective*, in: *Nordeuropaforum – Zeitschrift für Kulturstudien* 17/1 (2007), 27–44.

22 Ramirez/Soysal/Shanahan, *The Changing*, 1997, 737.

23 For further discussions on the intra- and inter-imperial approach, see for example N. Yasemin Baybek/Juho Korhonen, *A Country of White Lilies. Inter-Imperial Nation-Making and Development from the Russian Empire's Periphery to Post-Ottoman Turkey*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 66/2 (2024), 417–442, or Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality. Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History*, in: *Interventions* 16/2 (2014), 159–196.

24 Anca Parvulescu/Manuela Boatca, *Creolization as Method*, in: *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10/1 (2023), 121–127.

tively created a political space and narrative that combined global ideas with local politics. In other words, Finnish women's success lay in transcending the division or dichotomy between the national and the international, as suggested by Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan. As such, their agency can be difficult to recognize without taking off our retrospective post-1919 blinkers and rather contextualizing our analyses in terms of the intra- and inter-imperial relations that structured politics at the time. This was most clearly the case when women actively appropriated arguments and claims about democracy, statehood, and historical progress from (imperial) metropolitan contexts globally and then mobilized them in and for the peripheral and non-sovereign context.

Another important angle is the role of historical reasoning used by these political activists. They repurposed metropolitan and civilizational arguments and ideas in a non-sovereign and peripheral context against linear, hierarchical, teleological, and incrementalist notions of civilizational history and progress. In developing an alternative historical temporality, Finnish women arguing in favour of suffrage and equality mobilized the idea of progress as something that by definition transcends existing power relations. This is exemplified by the way in which it allowed Finnish women to circumscribe thinking that was prevalent in imperial metropolises and that would have confined women to the private sphere or subordinated women's suffrage to questions of class and nation.²⁵

Then, from the perspective of the historical reasoning mobilized by these women, women's suffrage and especially the right to stand for election and be active in the parliament was understood in the Grand Duchy in a global context of universal thinking about progress and civilization. Globally, in contrast, the Grand Duchy has often been presented as a special case against general explanations.

Next, I will briefly discuss the political situation in the Grand Duchy of Finland in relation to universal suffrage. From there, I expand to place Finland in a more global context of intra- and inter-imperial relations. Third, I move on to a substantial description of Finnish women as producers of global historical knowledge. Finally, before the conclusion, I briefly draw some comparisons to better contextualize the substantial description within the intra- and inter-imperial politics of the time.

25 Quoting both Irma Sulkunen and John Markoff, Ihalainen and Kinnunen summarize that in more metropolitan contexts "the conceptions of femininity and masculinity were more differentiated and where motherhood was used as an argument to confine women to the private sphere". Pasi Ihalainen/Tiina Kinnunen, *A Model Country of a Peripheral Anomaly? The Finnish Women's Suffrage and Female MPs in Transnational Debates, 1906–1919*, in: Tobias Kaiser/Andreas Schulz (eds.), *Vorhang auf! – Frauen in Parlament und Politik*, Düsseldorf 2022, 55–72, 56.

3. Universal suffrage in the Grand Duchy in a peripheral context

In the Grand Duchy of Finland, nationalist and socialist interests converged in the desire to broaden representativeness. Finnish workers' organizations were originally founded and run by liberal nationalists until the turn of the century. The nobleman and social democrat Nils Robert af Ursin embodied these joint interests. His commentary on developments in Norway, another non-sovereign country at the time (the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway), shows the logic behind the demands for representative reform. Writing in the workers' newspaper *Työmies*, he quoted a Norwegian newspaper as saying "those who wish to work for the independence of their fatherland on condition that they may keep their own citizens in a state of governmental adolescence – they lack the right patriotic spirit, the spirit that organically brings about power and victory".²⁶

The convergence of nationalist and socialist interests was equally noted by a major newspaper in Tampere, one of the main working-class cities in the Grand Duchy. In a series of editorials as early as 1894, the paper stated that the workers' question in Finland was not one of class conflict but rather one of national character.²⁷ The landholding peasantry also argued for wider representation with a similar logic. One of their representatives' appeals was published in the liberal and one of the major dailies, *Päivälehti*, which argued that "several groups of people, of whose governmental maturity there is no doubt [...], remain without suffrage in the countryside".²⁸ What was crucial about the calls for representative reform was that they promoted such a logic of comprehensive reform over incremental expansion. Any incremental steps would undermine the wider process of national awakening. *Päivälehti* summarized this stance already in 1894. The newspaper wrote that "the smaller the nation, the more dangerous it is to select particular groups from its populace and leave general matters in their hands, and to exclude the broad mass of people from governmental life".²⁹

The grand ducal state, as the intermediary of the Finnish nation in the Russian Empire, would require maximum support. The focus was on the character and

26 N. R. af Ursin, Yleinen äänioikeus ja Norjan työväestö [Universal Suffrage and the Working Class in Norway], in: *Työmies*, 12 February 1898, 2. All quotes from non-English primary sources are translated by the author.

27 Pentti Salmelin, Järjestölehdestä puoluelehdistöön. Suomen työväenlehdistön synty ja asema työväenliikkeen tiedotuskentässä ennen vuoden 1901 puoluekokousta [From an Organizational Magazine to a Party Press. The Birth and Role of the Finnish Workers' Press in the Information Field of the Labour Movement before the 1901 Party Congress], Helsinki 1967, 60.

28 Talonpoikaissäädyn vaaliolot [The Electoral Conditions of the Peasants' Estate], in: *Päivälehti*, 28 February 1897, 2.

29 Olemmeko me rikkaampia [Are We Richer], in: *Päivälehti*, 21 August 1894, 1.

intra-imperial position of the state, rather than on individual political rights. Following this general logic, women's suffrage could become a key political issue. In 1895, beginning a series of articles on suffrage in different countries, *Päivälehti* pointed out that wider representation in most countries was both universal and equal, in that the number of votes was equal, but that this "universal suffrage", which the newspaper put in quotation marks, "if it is both universal and equal [...] then on the other hand it is less than it appears, as in most cases it leaves all women without a vote".³⁰

From here the leap to full universal suffrage – that is the right for everyone to stand for election not just to vote – was logical. A long opinion piece published by *Päivälehti* in 1897 followed a similar logic. It argued that just as wider suffrage was beneficial for national development, which itself had to take place as a whole and for the entire nation, so too was women's suffrage, including the right to stand for election, for "the right to vote and the right to stand for election are interdependent".³¹

On the eve of the representative reforms of 1905/06, an opinion piece in the liberal *Helsingin Sanomat* summarized the encompassing logic that would drive active women's suffrage: "women's suffrage cannot be based on income levels, that would be doubly wrong. Reforms cannot be built on the old order of things."³² The thinking in the Grand Duchy then also turned away from suffrage based on income levels, which was proposed in many countries even before the reform became a possibility.

Three things stand out here: first, the connection between national progress and rights that were equal and as comprehensive as possible. Second, the idea that piecemeal, incremental improvements would undermine such progress. Third, the global comparison made in arguing for the first two. I return later to explore these arguments in more detail in the writings of activist women.

As a result, full universal suffrage gradually took precedence in discussions about the Grand Duchy's political future. A pamphlet from 1905 makes this clear. It first proclaimed that only a people in which every member felt that they enjoyed the benefits and rights of the fatherland could be guaranteed to rise up to secure the lawful state of the fatherland.³³ From this reference to Finland's position within the empire, the pamphlet moved to the argument for universal suffrage and a single-chamber parliament: "If Parliament is to be understood as the representative of the entire people [...] then the entire people must indeed be represented there [...], women and

30 Äänioikeusasia ulkomailla [Suffrage Abroad], in: *Päivälehti*, 5 October 1895, 2.

31 Valtiollista äänioikeutta naisille [National Suffrage for Women], in: *Päivälehti*, 27 March 1897, 2.

32 Elvira Willman, Sananen naisten äänioikeudesta [A Word about Women's Suffrage], in: *Helsingin Sanomat*, 17 November 1904, 3.

33 Suffice it to mention briefly that the Finnish Question and the legal debates surrounding it were almost always understood within a global context of states' rights, i.e. Finland's intra-imperial position within the Russian Empire was commonly understood as a global, inter-imperial question.

men”.³⁴ The pamphlet concluded that only this solution would bring the entire Finnish people to understand each other, which was necessary to save Finland. Universal suffrage, it was argued, represented Finnishness in general and the political position and future of the state in particular. Tellingly, the pamphlet was published under the pseudonym “One of the Smallest”.

In an illustration in the political satire magazine *Tuulispää*, universal suffrage literally breaks down the power of the old structures that had dammed the “river of Finnishness” and used the flow of water – “from the backs of the Finnish people” –



Figure 1: “It is finally breaking down with a roar”. Caption: “The mill on the neck of the Finnish river that had ground education, wellbeing, and power for an alien people. Once we build a new one, it will be one that belongs to the Finns.”

Source: *Tuulispää* 11 (15 March 1907), 1.

34 Yksi Pienimmistä, Toimet Kansan Hyväksi ja Nykyiset Valtiopäivät [One of the Smallest, Actions for the Good of the People and the Current Parliament], Kotka 1905, 7–9.

for the water mill of the old institutions that had produced “civilization [education], wealth and power for foreigners [not Finns]”.³⁵ The waves of universal suffrage now shatter this construction, and “the new one to be built will be one that belongs to the Finns” (see figure 1). In other words, the civilizational progress of Finnishness and the nation was equated with universal suffrage, and to oppose universal suffrage was to oppose the interests of the Grand Duchy and its citizens.

4. Universal suffrage in the Grand Duchy in a global context

It was not accidental that the Grand Duchy of Finland became the first democratic state in the world, in the modern sense of democracy, by introducing women’s suffrage, including the right of women to stand for election.³⁶ As outlined in the previous section, universal suffrage was seen domestically as linked to the destiny of the nation.

Global developments in suffrage, especially women’s suffrage, were followed closely in the Grand Duchy. The progressive views on the matter were not simply home-grown, a result of domestic politics, class-based or otherwise, or merely an outcome of Finland’s place in the empire, as the nationalist historiography constructed from as early as the 1860s and reinforced through the retrospective keyhole of independence as nation-state sovereignty after 1919 suggests. Rather, by the turn of the twentieth century, the women’s movement internationally had a strong transnational dynamic,³⁷ and Finland and Finnish women followed suit.

By 1905/06 the view on women’s suffrage in Finland was based on observations of universal suffrage in intra- and inter-imperial configurations worldwide. In 1896, for example, the Finnish daily *Päivälehti* published monthly articles on developments in suffrage globally, from Austria-Hungary and southern Australia to New Zealand, Colorado, and even small-town USA. The majority of these articles focused specifically on women’s suffrage, or at least mentioned and discussed it. In 1896 *Päivälehti* published a brief survey of the progress of suffrage around the world, asking “So far elsewhere, how about here?” It continued: “We are the lowest of the low in the ranking of suffrage in states [...] we are the furthest from universal suffrage in

35 See figure 1. Published in *Tuulispää* 11 (15 March 1907), 1.

36 Sulkunen, Finland, 2019, 143–154. It is important to note that modern democracy has had, and still has, strict limitations. To some extent this is even more the case today, as democracy is limited by the borders of sovereign nations, whereas in the Grand Duchy non-sovereign democratization was possible.

37 Johanna Gehmacher, *Feminist Activism, Travel and Translation Around 1900. Transnational Practices of Mediation and the Case of Käthe Schirmacher*, Cham 2024.

Europe, if one does not count in Russia and Turkey”.³⁸ Women’s political participation was linked to a combined thinking of a global civilizational logic, of past historical civilization and of future rational progress as a global phenomenon.

In 1908, for example, Anna Lundström³⁹ argued in a pamphlet published by the women’s association Naisasialiitto Unioni that “natural law” and logic showed legislation to be most efficient and successful when women participated equally.⁴⁰ Lundström went on that women’s equal role guaranteed rational legislation throughout societal relations. In another pamphlet, written in 1906, the women’s movement activist Hilma Räsänen argued that to understand why women did not have equal rights to political participation, one had to look for the answer in historical legacies, education, social wellbeing, and “general enlightenment”.⁴¹

In a similar vein, Finland was successful in internationalizing its nation-building project in a way that resonated with imperial debates on sovereignty and statehood, culminating in the globally debated ‘Finnish Question’ in the early twentieth century.⁴² As a result, the London Conference on the Finnish Question in 1910, for example, brought together legal scholars from across Europe to debate Finland’s position in the imperial structures of the day.⁴³ Other commentaries compared the Grand Duchy with cases from around the globe (from Madagascar and Slavonia to Ireland, Egypt, and India), as did various political and diplomatic actors, from Woodrow Wilson to Clara Zetkin.⁴⁴

For example, following Finland’s democratic reform, the *Manchester Guardian* wrote that “small nations have always been the pioneers in constitutional and political experiments, and Finland is no exception to the rule [...]. Finland is now the most democratic country in Europe [...], even disabilities of sex have been removed”.⁴⁵ In an article a year later, the newspaper specifically connected this democratic reform to Finland’s intra- and inter-imperial position: “The ultra-democratic character of its [Finland’s] Parliamentary forms only serves to bring out in sharper contrast the

38 Yleinen äänioikeus [Universal Suffrage], in: Päivälehti, 11 June 1896, 3.

39 Anna Lundström was an activist writer and the first chair of the Helsinki branch of the Swedish Party’s women’s organization.

40 Anna Lundström, *Taisteluun Tietämättömyyttä ja Ennakkoluuloja Vastaan* [To Battle against Ignorance and Prejudice], Helsinki 1908.

41 Hilma Räsänen, *Mihin naisten äänioikeus velvoittaa?* [What Does Women’s Suffrage Oblige Us to?], Helsinki 1906. Hilma Räsänen (1877–1955) was a teacher and activist and in 1907 one of the first female MPs.

42 Korhonen, *Empire*, 2019.

43 *Finnland und Rußland. Die internationale Londoner Konferenz vom 26. Februar bis 1. März 1910*, Leipzig 1911.

44 Korhonen, *Empire*, 2019.

45 A Finnish Correspondent, “Democratic Finland”, in: *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 April 1907, 7.

limits of its freedom [...]. [Finland] can boast the most democratic political forms in the world”.⁴⁶

American discussions of the Finnish Question often focused on race and racial characteristics to explain peripheral democracy. The *New York Times* commented that the newly elected “bi-sexual” Congress of the “stern and gloomy” Finnish “race” “cannot flourish” unless the 14 (out of 19) unmarried female MPs marry quickly.⁴⁷ The Ottoman journal *Servet-i Fünun*, on the other hand, cast a more positive light on women’s suffrage:

“In Finland, women are fully involved in politics. But contrary to the misconceptions of some, the fact that Finnish women are in politics has never harmed their grace and sweetness, it has never hindered their dealings with family duties. No individual in Finland has ever heard of family break-ups or divorces as a result of women’s political rights. Above all, women have become very important actors in the economic and social life of Finland.”⁴⁸

The journal continued by listing what it considered important new legislation passed thanks to female MPs.

The US *Independent* reported in 1907 that “The [Finnish] Diet convened May 22nd, and for the first time in the world’s history women took their seats in an elected national parliament”.⁴⁹ Here too, it would be a historical mistake not to interpret the metropolitan and imperial perspectives on the Grand Duchy in relation to intra- and inter-imperial dynamics. The *New York Times* wrote in 1907 that the democratic reform in Finland “establishes a precedent of striking importance with reference to the treatment of such [minority] nationalities, though it is to be remarked that none of others has shown the fitness for the exercise of political functions shown in Finland”.⁵⁰ Again, we see the civilizational racism that was often present in Atlantic empires’ metropolitan commentary on democratization and various minority nationalities. They continued, “Whatever the motive that may have induced the Czar to make this remarkable grant, it is a most encouraging sign.”⁵¹

Similarly, in 1907 a writer for the US periodical *Outlook*, while directly connecting women’s suffrage in Finland to the Finnish Question and Finland’s intra- and inter-imperial position, criticized a prevailing view in Anglo-Saxon commentaries:

46 A Finnish Correspondent, “Democracy in Finland”, in: *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 November 1908, 8.

47 [No author], *Women in the Finnish Diet*, in: *The New York Times*, 26 May 1907, SM9.

48 *Kadınlar ve Hakk-ı İntihab* [Women and Suffrage], in: *Servet-i Fünun*, 4 June 1914, 64.

49 *Progress of Women’s Suffrage*, in: *The Independent*, 4 July 1907, 49.

50 *The Liberties of Finland*, in: *The New York Times*, 9 September 1907, 6.

51 *Ibid.*

“Much unfair criticism has been directed against these nineteen women [elected to the Finnish parliament]. Their photographs have been published in many magazines, where it has been pointed out that they are neither shapely nor handsome – which certainly has little to do with their ability as legislators. The foreign critics further emphasize the fact that certain of them are poorly educated and come from the lower classes of society.”⁵²

In the end, it is not so important whether Finland was actually the first democratic state. The more interesting question is why full women’s suffrage took place in what was considered the periphery of civilization and empire.⁵³ As we have seen,



Figure 2: “All together for the fatherland!”, “In almost all localities women voters were in the majority”, sign: “Voting area”. The speech bubbles say: “Who will Ms. Jansson vote for! ... Bondistam of course ... Yes, Bondistam is good ... Think about the cost of coffee ... I will vote for Anni Fyryhjelm ... O Verna Hjelt O ... Klockarsfar ...”.

A foreigner passes by a polling station in Helsinki on the 1 July 1916, to his guide:

- What causes this queue? Is a women’s hat shop going out of business or a rich home auctioning their wares?
- No, it’s the parliamentary elections here in Helsinki ...

Source: *Fyren* 25/26 (8 July 1916), 9.

⁵² G. H. Blakeslee, Woman Suffrage in Finland, in: *Outlook*, 7 September 1907, 35.

⁵³ Korhonen, *Empire*, 2019.

this state of affairs was recognized and actively mobilized by the Finns themselves and commented on by others. The 1916 cartoon (see figure 2) above reflects on the news that the majority of voters in the elections were women. And in fact, the average number of women elected to parliament increased steadily until independence. Ten years after the introduction of women's suffrage in Finland, the cartoon was still making fun of the fact that foreigners could not imagine women voting and discussing politics. The cartoon depicts a queue at the polling station where the majority are women actively discussing politics.

Finland was not alone as a periphery that sought to reinterpret itself by actively following and combining metropolitan ideas. Comparing the first cases of women's suffrage globally, Irma Sulkunen has pointed out that the international perspective

“reveals that women's suffrage was first adopted in young nations where democracy had rapidly grown while the old empires followed their example only after decades of struggle. Moreover, the general tendency of the old nations was the strong emphasis they placed upon the opposite natural essence of the genders and the linkage of this difference to the dichotomy of the public and private spheres of life [...]. On the contrary, during the emergence of the new nation, the gender difference or, more precisely, the importance of gender in relation to political rights, was put aside rather than visibly highlighted. It seems that external pressures, often felt to be oppressive, tended to unify the national front, making class and especially gender related factors of disruption, which were threatening the nation from within, fade away.”⁵⁴

A picture in the Finnish political journal *Fyren* from 1907 provides a striking example (see figure 3). It depicts an “international ski-jumping competition in democracy”, in which, after a miserable Russian performance, Finland makes a beautiful jump and sets the world record. Importantly, all the major powers, such as England, France, or the US, are portrayed as watching.

54 Sulkunen, *Suffrage*, 2007, 31.

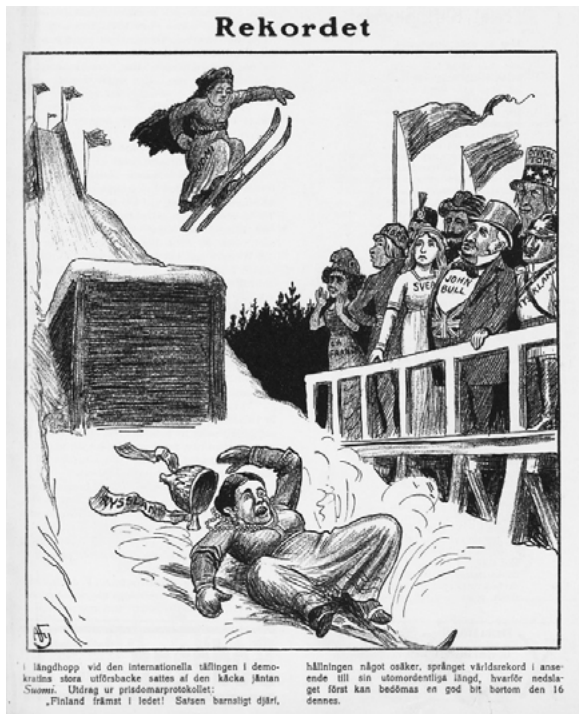


Figure 3: "Record".

Source: *Fyren 11* (16 March 1907), 5.

5. Finnish women as producers of global historical knowledge

At least from the 1890s, the so-called Woman Question in its global dimension was closely followed in Finland in conjunction with issues of progress, civilization, and the rights of the people and of states, and was seen as connected with the Finnish Question. Looking at the period between 1890 and 1910, Kinnunen makes the important point that "feminist activists always related progress in women's rights to both national and international development more generally".⁵⁵ Between 1893 and 1903, for example, the Finnish bourgeois suffragist Alexandra Gripenberg wrote a four-volume study entitled *Naisasian kehitys eri maissa* [The Development of the Woman Question in Different Countries].⁵⁶ Gripenberg was a prolific writer who joined the Finnish Women's Association in the 1880s and attended the founding meeting of the International Council of Women in Washington in 1887. Historians

⁵⁵ Kinnunen, *Progress*, 2022, 116.

⁵⁶ Alexandra Gripenberg, *Naisasian Kehitys eri maissa* [The Development of the Woman Question in Different Countries], 4 vols., Porvoossa 1905–1909 [orig. 1893–1903].

Johanna Annola and Pirkko Markkola call her “the most internationally recognized Finnish feminist of her time”.⁵⁷

In the more than one thousand pages of the four volumes,⁵⁸ Gripenberg surveyed the development of the Woman Question in 19 countries or regions, including Finland. It is important to note that the Woman Question was intrinsically seen there as a civilizational question dating back centuries or even millennia. This connection is epistemically crucial and resembled the arguments in favour of Finland’s political autonomy and democratization within the Russian Empire in general, connecting them to an inevitable march of progress. A march, however, that was uneven and global, and not located in any particular state or empire. For Gripenberg, it was a common global development, one that humans were all constantly and divergently pursuing and, importantly, sometimes falling behind of or even fighting against in a futile effort. A development without trailblazers, but rather one that proceeded as an interconnected wave. Its power and thrust derived from the movement below the surface, while the visible waves on the surface sometimes splashed and broke.

What is indicative of the networks and circulations behind this particular conceptualization is that Gripenberg was in active correspondence with nearly twenty women worldwide while preparing the first volume. However, it is crucial to note that this global circulation corresponded to a view of history, historical development, and laws to which the Woman Question was seen as universally tied. Importantly, this interpretation differed from contemporary and later civilizationalist and developmentalist accounts, which saw the Woman Question as part of – or sometimes as a mere addition to – an incrementalist trajectory of civilizational progress and democratic advancement that could be confined to particular states or nations. The latter model saw advancement as spearheaded by the most progressive places (usually Western imperial metropolises) with others following suit along the same singular track to the best of their ability.

Instead, the view propagated by Gripenberg and – I argue – reflected in the wider women’s rights movement in the Grand Duchy of Finland, was almost closer to what is sometimes called today a decolonial perspective, with a focus on modernity’s dark

57 Johanna Annola/Pirkko Markkola, Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg and the International Council of Women. The Finnish Feminist’s International Success and National Adversity, 1888–1911, in: *Women’s History Review* 32/2 (2023), 190–208, 190. See also Kinnunen, *The National*, 2016.

58 The Finnish translation was published in four volumes while the original Swedish-language text appeared in three volumes. In terms of language, there were organizational divisions between Swedish- and Finnish-speaking Finns across the political spectrum, but by the turn of the century these were largely overridden by larger issues of women’s rights and national struggles, as this paper also suggests. These issues united the various political actors far more than language divided them. See for example Ihalainen/Kinnunen, *A Model*, 2022, 55–72. Furthermore, translation was not an issue in most cases. Gripenberg herself translated into Finnish, and many actors spoke several languages, as was common in all border regions of Eurasian empires.

colonial underbelly. As Gripenberg wrote, “every time a long recognized or tolerated oppression is reversed, the proponents of improvement are accused of attempting to overthrow the natural order”⁵⁹

Gripenberg then proposed an alternative temporality for human progress to the traditional linear, teleological, incrementalist view of development. She suggested that history was “limitless” and that there was “always something ahead of it [history] that trails behind”, so that human life advanced “in spirals”, rather than linearly. She then emphasized that the Woman Question was “irrevocably attached” to this form of spiral and frictional historical development.⁶⁰ In other words, she pointed out that any civilizational advancement would always create further resistance to it, an almost dialectical understanding that identified a constant struggle with past inequalities as the basis of development. Importantly, Gripenberg spoke of the “decline of power relations” as a manifestation of this type of development and progress in the Woman Question.

Alexandra Gripenberg attributed this form of development – in which the history of declining power relations was always preceded by something that was behind – to the perception of men as universally free versus women as particularly free, that women’s subjection was based on men’s universality as the reference point against which women’s freedom was measured, as was generally the case in Eurocentric, colonial, incrementalist, and linear historical thinking. To be sure, I am not suggesting that Gripenberg would have been a decolonial thinker as such, almost the opposite.⁶¹ However, much of the later, retrospective history of women’s suffrage in the Grand Duchy has been interpreted through a Eurocentric and methodologically nationalist lens. The reference to decolonial thinking simply allows me to contrast the differences in temporality and epistemology that were present in knowledge production there, and how they differed from contemporary and later understandings of civilization/development.⁶²

The global or international dimension of Gripenberg’s argument comes as no surprise. Annola and Markkola point out that personally “Gripenberg viewed Finnish parliamentary reform from an international point of view”⁶³ Kinnunen argues that “the national and international were truly inseparable elements in her activism”.⁶⁴ More generally, Kinnunen underlines “the entanglement of the national

59 Gripenberg, *Naisasian*, vol. 1, 1905 [1893], 1.

60 *Ibid.*, 2.

61 Gripenberg contrasted civilization with barbarism and saw Protestant countries as models for other nations. See for example Kinnunen, *The National*, 2016, 652–670.

62 For an extended conversation on the topic, see for example Bavbek/Korhonen, *A Country of White Lilies*, 2024.

63 Annola/Markkola, *Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg*, 2023, 198.

64 Kinnunen, *The National*, 2016, 665.

and international as well as the role of transfers and networking across borders in the formation in feminist politics”.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, historian Aura Korppi-Tommola points out that the international contacts Gripenberg made were decisive: “the ideology of women’s emancipation and suffrage was learned from reading and travelling” and “international contacts strengthened the demands of Finnish women at home”.⁶⁶ Especially the second point is essential. In my view, however, it is decisive only in conjunction with the acknowledgement that Finnish women were active in shaping and moulding global views into a localized line of argument, almost a worldview. Moreover, even though Gripenberg later became more critical of the radical nature of Finnish suffrage due to her anti-socialist views,⁶⁷ general elements of her historical epistemology were shared by others. They were the product of a collective engagement with women’s rights in Finland understood in a global context.

Kinnunen summarizes that “the international activists of the first wave of feminism did not typically identify with cosmopolitanism. In this respect, the internationalisms of the feminist and labour movements showed similarities”.⁶⁸ For example, Hilja Pärssinen, leader of the Working Women’s Association and a member of parliament after 1907, linked the question of women’s political rights and equality to the autonomy and non-dependence of the peripheral, non-sovereign state. In a pamphlet from 1903, entitled *Voting Rights from the Point of View of the Working Woman*, Pärssinen wrote that universal suffrage would lead to the unity of the nation and its internal strength.⁶⁹ She strongly linked universal suffrage and equal political rights across class and gender divisions to the strength of the state and thereby to the freedom of the people in global relations. Two years later, at the time of the debates on suffrage reform, Pärssinen wrote that unequal suffrage would directly “weaken our resistance to the alien oppressor”,⁷⁰ referring to Finland’s position in the Russian Empire and, as I would argue, to the “something that trailed behind” but lied ahead of the history of declining power relations. In this vein, Hilja Pärssinen went on to describe the suffrage reform as “a most important moment of patriotism”, which could also be an act of “state stupidity and egoism” if not implemented as full universal suffrage.⁷¹

65 Ibid.

66 Aura Korppi-Tommola, A Long Tradition of Equality. Women’s Suffrage in Finland, in: Blanca Rodriguez Ruiz/Ruth Rubio Marin (eds.), *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe*, Leiden 2012, 47–59, 50.

67 Kinnunen, *The National*, 2016, 652–670.

68 Kinnunen, *Progress*, 2022, 118.

69 Hilja Pärssinen, *Äänioikeusasia työläisnaisten kannalta* [Voting Rights from the Point of View of the Working Woman], Helsinki 1903, 3–8.

70 Hilja Pärssinen, *Naiset mukaan. Vähän äänioikeusasiasta* [Involving Women. A Little Bit about Suffrage], Helsinki 1905, 3–23, 15.

71 Ibid.

In these writings, Pärssinen also always connected the question of equal pay to the economic independence of the nation, and strengthened her argument by making global comparisons with other countries and their reforms, from Belgium to Germany, Greece, and Norway. Reminiscent of Gripenberg's understanding of historical progress, Pärssinen likened those who would oppose universal suffrage, including fellow citizens, to a group of robbers who invaded the country and violently oppressed the people, using them as sacrificial stepping stones as they advanced through the swamp.⁷² In contrast, Pärssinen argued that the laws of a people could only be written by the people, thus connecting the idea of universal suffrage as a means of transforming power relations to the so-called Finnish Question, that is the legal debates over Finland's position in the empire.

Finnish actors had long fought a legal battle for Finland's rightful autonomy, and successfully expanded it into an international debate, of which universal suffrage became a part through the work of Finnish activist women's knowledge production. Korppi-Tommola dates the tradition of arguing for full suffrage to the founding of the Women's Association in 1884 and, importantly, notes the influences of the Seneca Falls Convention in the US and human rights discussions derived from the tradition of the French Revolution.⁷³ Hilja Pärssinen and another leading social democratic woman, Hilda Seppälä, linked their political views to the relation between enlightenment and equality.⁷⁴ In making this connection, Pärssinen refined and expanded a long-standing social democratic argument by connecting the legitimacy of these legal issues with national and nationwide equality. The power of the argument comes from linking the people and the nation as a whole to an imagined international standing of progress and development. Thus, Pärssinen associated Finland's international status with the need for universal suffrage.

Indeed, at their famous meeting in Forssa in 1903, the social democrats argued that "it is natural [...] that the laws written by a class-based system of representation [...] cannot be considered as binding responsibilities beyond the necessity of external force";⁷⁵ thus connecting political rights with state rights. Pärssinen and other women extended this to the question of women's political rights, by-passing it as a purely separate women's issue in the realm of the private-public divide. Rather, it was a matter of Finland's global progress. "Only it [a people's diet with universal suffrage]

72 Hilja Pärssinen, *Taisteleville siskoille. Mietteitä äänioikeusasiasta* [For the Fighting Sisters. Thoughts about Suffrage], Viipuri 1906, 1.

73 Korppi-Tommola, *A Long Tradition*, 2012, 49.

74 Maria Lähteenmäki, *Mahdollisuuksien Aika* [The Time of Opportunities], Helsinki 1995, 240.

75 Pärssinen, *Taisteleville*, 1906, 3.

can save our ship of state from the storm into which the winds from the south-east [St Petersburg] are blowing it”.⁷⁶

In this line of argument, Pärssinen ascribed to a similar understanding of civilizational and political progress as Gripenberg. She argued that “if moles wanted electric light in their underground tunnels, it would be illogical for them to adopt candles first, then the oil lamp, and only in the distant future electric light”.⁷⁷ In so doing, Pärssinen, like Gripenberg, rejected an incrementalist and unilinear idea of civilizational progress. Similarly, Pärssinen further asserted that universal suffrage was not the result of a higher and nobler civilization, but, on the contrary, a path to it.

These connections to a particular idea of historical progress and to global imperial and colonial relations are crucial to the way Finnish women promoted their rights. They successfully distanced the question from issues of (patriarchal) civilization, “natural laws”, or the private-public divide, while maintaining a universalist and global perspective to their position. Thus, while the first petition for women’s right to vote in Finland in 1897 had failed because the majority of the relevant committee “regarded women as unfit for political life”,⁷⁸ this line of argument and logic no longer held any sway against the ideas put forward by supporters of equal suffrage just nine years later.⁷⁹

A pamphlet published in 1905 by “women of different social classes of the city of Tampere”, entitled *Tampereen naisten vaatimukset äänioikeus- ja eduskunta-asiassa* [The Demands of the Women of Tampere in the Matter of Voting Rights and the Diet], brought these perspectives together in a powerful way. The authors began with patriotism and quickly moved on to what a true “cultured people” should look like. Without equal rights, they would not be “the free women of a free nation”.⁸⁰ They demanded that “in this age of enlightenment and freedom” the only option was full universal suffrage and a single-chamber parliament. The authors cleverly juxtaposed any possible legal obstacles with the question of “women’s stately liberation”, linking the issue back to the legality of the Finnish state as measured against universal progress, and pointing out that any incremental improvements – and especially those politicians who used them as an excuse against universal suffrage – would

76 Ibid., 5 f.

77 Ibid., 7.

78 Jussi Kurunmäki, The Breakthrough of Universal Suffrage in Finland, 1905–1906, in: Kari Palonen/Tuija Pulkkinen/Jose Maria Rosales (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Politics of Democratization in Europe*, New York 2008, 355–370, 358.

79 For example, Professor Hermanson, who was well versed in modern political theory and unsuccessfully opposed equal suffrage as a member of the Reform Committee for the parliamentary reform, argued that “the essential nature of women [...] be best fulfilled in the private sphere but corrupted on the merciless stage of public politics”; Sulkunen, Finland, 2019, 150.

80 [No author], *Tampereen naisten vaatimukset äänioikeus- ja eduskunta-asiassa* [The Demands of the Women of Tampere in the Matter of Suffrage and Parliament], Tampere 1905, 4.

be at odds with the supposed civilizational status and claims of the national state.⁸¹ Finally, they invited all men “for whom the welfare of the nation is more important than the unequal advantages of their own sex” to join them.⁸² This short pamphlet outlined the argument behind this worldview, as it contrasted local resistance to universal suffrage with the civilizational future of the nation and the state. In effect, the authors asked those who resisted whether they really wanted to be “something that trailed behind” and place themselves as obstacles in the way of the history of progress. Korppi-Tommola also agrees that in this fight for state rights “gender lines were blurred”.⁸³

The conservative Hilda Käkikoski also connected women’s political participation to state autonomy. In 1904, in a pamphlet entitled *On Women’s Suffrage*, she argued that all those women who were not yet on the side of universal suffrage and who considered it unfeminine only thought so because they had not yet realized the importance of state autonomy. Even the conservative Käkikoski used state autonomy to undermine the private-public divide. According to her, these women did “not yet understand the importance of suffrage in the life of states, nations, and private individuals”.⁸⁴ Käkikoski’s pamphlet continued, in a very recognizable tone for those familiar with Gripenberg’s work, that while the idea of human rights had been “purified” over the centuries, most countries were lagging behind. And, fatefully, through this global civilizational detour, Käkikoski proceeded in pointing out that this was detrimental to the Finnish fatherland, to patriotism, although she had just mentioned that most other countries in the world were also lagging behind. In a beautiful twist, Käkikoski went on to argue that since more developed countries like Britain could afford such a waste of human potential, small and poor Finland could not. Even though at this point the conservative Käkikoski was in favour of incremental reform, first granting the right to vote and only then to stand for election, her historical reasoning followed similar lines, connecting Finland’s position globally to civilizational development, and seeing that progress always created resistance.

Similar temporal and historical understandings were also put forward by the famous bourgeois suffragist Lucina Hagman in her essay that analysed why, despite the successful reform of 1906 and the election of women to the Finnish parliament, their efforts to enact more equal legislation had stalled. Hagman looked at communal and societal institutions and pointed out that they have all been created through patriarchal power relations and as images and supporters of those relations: “these institutions regularly serve the needs of the power groups and the gender that has

81 Ibid., 5.

82 Ibid., 6.

83 Korppi-Tommola, *A Long Tradition*, 2012, 48.

84 Hilda Käkikoski, *Naisen Äänioikeudesta [About Women’s Suffrage]*, Helsinki 1904, 7.

organized them.”⁸⁵ But this is where the non-incrementalist part comes in: Hagman argued that as civilization had progressed, those institutions least associated with the older patriarchal forms of power had been the easiest to reform, whereas those most deeply rooted in the older traditions had been the hardest for civilizational progress to uproot. She then made a direct comparison between patriarchal institutions and the institutions of slavery, arguing that their juxtaposition with civilization and “civilized countries” was equal, but that the institutions of slavery had been removed and the patriarchal institutions remained.⁸⁶

In my view, these specific forms of historical and global political reasoning worked in the context of a non-sovereign periphery. When the suffrage reform passed in 1905/06, even a conservative figure such as the historian Kustavi Grotenfelt, representing the aristocracy, stated that although he did not think that women should naturally have the right to vote, he believed that the work of Finnish women in the state’s struggles to preserve its autonomy (that is global rights and laws) had earned them universal suffrage.⁸⁷ My view, then, is an extension and specification of Irma Sulkunen’s argument that in the Finnish suffrage debate “the favourable outcome for women was a consequence of the extraordinary, albeit short-lived, coincidence” of two factors, “innovative international political thinking” together with the “creation of local social traditions”, both of which, Sulkunen specifies, coincided with Finland’s specific form of nation-state building,⁸⁸ which took place in a non-sovereign context of global imperial relations.

Finally, this particular global historical line of argument adopted by Finnish women may also have benefited, according to Sulkunen, from an overall “scant awareness of the international debate over suffrage and the abstention from any discussion of the principles concerning gender relations and rights”, which paradoxically proved beneficial to “the early granting of suffrage to women in Finland”.⁸⁹ In my view, however, this argument only serves to highlight the importance and innovation of these women in producing politically highly powerful global historical knowledge and argumentation in this context.

Women’s rights activists from across the political spectrum, writing in favour of equality and full suffrage, shared similar arguments in terms of their historical modality and global connections, with specific implications for non-sovereign,

85 Lucina Hagman, *Yhteiskuntalaitosten suhtautuminen naisten oikeuksiin* [The Attitudes of Societal Institutions towards Women’s Rights], Helsinki 1911, 3.

86 Ibid.

87 Maija Rajainen, *Yleiset äänioikeusteoriat ja naisten äänioikeusliike Suomessa* [General Voting Rights Theories and the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Finland], Helsinki 1959, 12.

88 Sulkunen, *Suffrage, Nation and Citizenship*, 2009, 97.

89 Ibid., 98.

peripheral state policies. This perspective transcended debates that focused on the class, cultural, and domestic dimensions of the success of women's rights in Finland.⁹⁰ Korppi-Tommola points out that, in comparison to other countries, when the moment for reform came, the women's movement in Finland had been "promoting its message for decades" and "women's rights were commonly accepted as part and parcel of the struggle against Russification".⁹¹ This was helped by the specific and unified form of historical and global reasoning deployed by Finnish women.

6. Finnish women's knowledge production in a global context

The Finnish perspective and line of argument was an amalgamation between local and global views. For example, connecting women's voting rights with the state's struggle for autonomy through ideas of progress helped override arguments based on private-public divisions. Kinnunen proposes a similar argument for the role of nationalism within the international movement, which "can be read as radical: it presented women as public persons (equal to men), representing their nations, instead of regarding them as persons belonging to the private sphere due to their gender."⁹²

This had some resonance in discussions abroad. The US newspaper *Independent* wrote in 1907 that

"the long oppression under which the men of Finland suffered for so many years, when they were deprived of all voice in their government, and the devotion, courage and loyalty of the women during this dark period, were doubtless the reasons which impelled the men to include them in all the political rights which they finally gained for themselves. The women suffered every privation, took every risk, were sent to prison and even to Siberia. When at last the Finnish people wrested from the Czar of Russia permission to have a constitution which would enable them to govern themselves, all political parties were united in the desire that it should give equal rights to women."⁹³

The article was also added to US suffragist Elizabeth Smith Miller's scrapbook collection of pieces on women's suffrage.

⁹⁰ Korppi-Tommola, *A Long Tradition*, 2012, 54.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Kinnunen, *Progress*, 2022, 118. Importantly, Kinnunen goes on to point out that this role of nationalism within multinational empires, as in the case of the Grand Duchy of Finland, "could be difficult for British, US American and other Western leaders [of the movements] to handle" (*ibid.*).

⁹³ *Progress of Women's Suffrage*, in: *The Independent*, 4 July 1907, 49.

And while the importance of these arguments taking place in a transnational and global space has often been overlooked in more nationally grounded histories, an intra- and inter-imperial perspective was in fact the default rather than the exception in the early twentieth century. Preparing for the Amsterdam conference of the International Woman's Suffrage Alliance in 1908, Bertha Damaris Knobe wrote in *Harper's Weekly* that "the 'recapitulation' roll-call at Amsterdam will sound decidedly cosmopolitan. To begin: There are the four full-suffrage countries of New Zealand, Australia, Finland, and Norway".⁹⁴ In fact, it was not only cosmopolitan but also decidedly peripheral. Three of the four countries were non-sovereign parts of imperial powers, while Norway had only gained independence from Sweden in 1905. In such places, it was commonplace to actively follow global debates in order to position oneself intra-imperially and seek political manoeuvres that could leverage shifts in inter-imperial politics. Women's suffrage was no exception, and the fact that such non-sovereign places were recognized in these debates as countries in their own right, and even more so as the most progressive in the world on this matter, benefited both suffragists in the metropolises and these peripheral non-sovereign states in global politics.

To drive home the point, we can contrast, for example, the speech of New York suffragist Anne Fitzhugh Miller in 1906, where she stated that in "Finland, one of the most progressive nations, absolute equality in political rights has recently been granted";⁹⁵ with the following statements: US President Woodrow Wilson described the Finns as unfit for self-determination⁹⁶ and, as mentioned earlier, *The New York Times* characterized the Finnish "race" as "stern and gloomy" and predicted that if the 14 unmarried women elected to parliament in the "bi-sexual election" did not marry soon, "it will be clearly apparent to the merest tyro in politics that the bi-sexual Congress cannot flourish and bear fruit for the generations to come".⁹⁷

The general argument of these Finnish women also stood in contrast to the assessment of the London Conference on the Finnish Question. The conference's

94 Bertha Damaris Knobe, Votes for Women: An Object-Lesson, in: *Harper's Weekly*, 25 April 1908, 20–21. It should be noted that Norway achieved full national suffrage only in 1913. In 1907 income and marriage still restricted suffrage in Norway. In Australia, Aboriginal people did not have voting rights until the 1960s, and in New Zealand women could not stand for election until 1919, and 1944 for the lower and upper house respectively, see for example Irma Sulkunen, Naisten äänioikeus meillä ja muualla [Women's Suffrage in Finland and Elsewhere], in: Pirjo Markkola/Alexandra Ramsay (eds.), *Yksi kamari – kaksi sukupuolta. Suomen Eduskunnan ensimmäiset naiset* [One Chamber – Two Genders. The First Women in the Finnish Parliament], Helsinki 1997, 9–22.

95 "The Broader Outlook" delivered by Anne Fitzhugh Miller, at Universalism Women's Aid Association Meeting, 1906.

96 Korhonen, *Empire*, 2019. See also Markku Ruotsila, Churchill and Finland. A Study in Anticommunism and Geopolitics, London/New York 2005, 14.

97 [No author], Women in the Finnish Diet, in: *The New York Times*, 26 May 1907, SM9.

report diminished Finland's "progress" to a mere side-effect of being a part of the much less developed Russian nation. This was based on the opinion of the most prestigious West European legal scholars. Participants of the conference included law professors from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Berlin, Göttingen, Paris, Grenoble, and Leiden. Their "scientific explanation" was not based on international law in today's sense. Rather, in accordance with the ideas of the time that legitimized metropolitan rule in Atlantic empires, history, race, "temperament", and customs mattered; they saw it as a question of "social development".⁹⁸

Much like the supposed right of Western metropolitan nations to govern the peripheral states of their empires, these scholars thought that the historical, racial, temperamental, and customary right of Finnish autonomy was in no way connected to its statehood in a global context.⁹⁹ They saw that an integration of the rights and legal codes of the empire could only happen if the Russian metropole would liberalize and "catch up" with the Grand Duchy, or if the Grand Duchy, through the will of its people, willingly relinquished some of its rights and regressed in order to be on the same level of development as the rest of the empire.

This theory reveals the origins of what we might call the Finnish *Sonderweg* (that is the historiographical logic of a specific, non-normal route through otherwise universalized developments that explains even long-term differences with comparable cases), as well as the similar but reversed political exclusion of the colonies and peripheries of the Atlantic empires from democratization of their metropolises. "[The Finnish Question] could be seen [by the British] as a struggle of civilized Finns against barbarous and reactionary Russians",¹⁰⁰ as historian Anthony F. Upton has noted. Here, in direct contrast to Gripenberg's historical epistemology, progress was measured precisely in terms of different state units of racialized peoples, some of which spearheaded progress and civilization and others followed, instead of progress being globally shared and universal. Here, historical progress did not advance in spirals or create resistance and find something ahead that trails behind, but advanced teleologically in a linear fashion. And here progress certainly did not lead to the decline of power relations, but rather explained and created them.

98 Finnland und Rußland, 1911, 103.

99 Ibid., 112.

100 A[nthony] F. Upton, Review: Anssi Halmesvirta: The British Conception of the Finnish 'Race', Nation, and Culture, 1760–1918, in: The American Historical Review 96/4 (1991), 1216.

7. Conclusion

The epistemic making of women's suffrage in the Grand Duchy was a matter of the global entanglements of peripheral, non-sovereign, and imperial relations, which were actively interpreted by women producing knowledge by connecting local, intra-imperial politics with global, inter-imperial ideas. Even before the 1905/06 reform in the Grand Duchy, strong movements pushed forward by women theorized and contextualized women's political participation and universal suffrage through a global episteme. In this theory, Finland's particular position as a non-sovereign periphery strengthened and enforced a national understanding of its inseparability from claims and questions of democratization and civilization.

The perspective provided in this paper takes peripheral relations and global circuits of knowledge production as the basis for women's suffrage. It turns our attention to epistemic work that has made visible and argued against exclusionary understandings of 'progress', understandings that do not see peripheries or women as integral to the making of modern democracy. This perspective begins to better explain the success of the Finnish women's movement in circumscribing and overcoming other divides and divisions, including those of public-private, gender, class, and language.

Historian Jussi Kurunmäki, like many others, has noted that "the most striking feature of the legitimization of universal suffrage and the electoral system was the dominant role of the rhetoric of the unity of the people and its interconnectedness with the perceived national cause of the country".¹⁰¹ Referring to the records of the 1906 Reform Committee, he continues that "it was crucial that 'all were included' in a non-independent country like Finland".¹⁰² To explain such observations, we need to approach Finnish women as producers of a particular kind of global historical knowledge at the conjunction of intra- and inter-imperial relations.

This also suggests that the interdependencies between sovereignty, democracy, and statehood that were consolidated after the First World War in the vein of Eurocentric thinking were fundamentally different from the arguments of these women. They actively obscure the kind of political and knowledge practices outlined here that would rely on transnational connections and counter understandings of history based on trajectories of sovereign rule.

Finally, in the cartoon below (see figure 4), a plainly dressed woman snatches the Finnish flag from two representatives of the Estates, who are trying to hold on to it with a *Nagaika*, a Russian (Cossack) crowd-control whip. In no uncertain terms, the

¹⁰¹ Kurunmäki, *The Breakthrough*, 2008, 362.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

picture suggests that the women's suffrage movement in the Grand Duchy overcame the old rule and monopoly of violence of the imperial state by appropriating the state and nation from the combined union of inter-imperial power and local patriarchy.

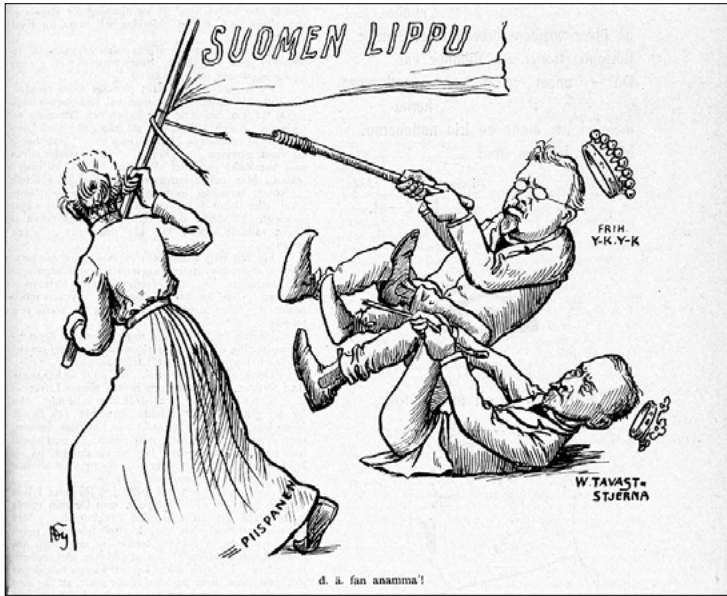


Figure 4: “Finnish flag”. A woman activist takes the Finnish flag from two representatives of sovereign power, who try to hold on to it with a Nagaika, a whip for crowd-control, which essentially represents the monopoly of violence held by the sovereign imperial metropole.
Source: *Fyren 18* (29 April 1905), 1.

In terms of theoretical understandings of democracy, the idea of democratization described in this paper and advanced by Finnish women activists in the early twentieth century was one that rendered earlier forms of democracy obsolete, that is successful democratization rewrote its own history by updating its future goalposts. The women activists discussed here argued that as democratic innovation proceeded and led to a decline in power relations, this required a form of theorizing that reconsidered previous forms of democratization by relabelling them as something else, as the something that now trailed behind progress. The core of these women's historical line of argument was that, in the Grand Duchy, the promotion of a less radical form of democratization, at a time when greater equality was already possible and known, would not have been a step towards democracy, but rather a concession to maintaining old hierarchies.

Finnish women activists no longer recognized earlier forms of democratic innovation as such. They did not consider them as some kind of developmental steps on the same linear line of progress, leading in incremental steps from a less advanced to

a more advanced democracy. Rather, new forms of democracy and equality revealed previous forms as qualitatively different. New forms of democracy and equality exposed previous forms as carriers and upholders of exclusions and inequalities that needed to be eradicated for progress to take place. Earlier forms, such as universal male suffrage or democracy reserved to sovereign politics, were then located on a different level of the spiral of history and were understood as something that trailed behind the spiral of progress, but which was ahead of it as an obstacle. Thinking more generally about democratic theory, this is the particular form of historicization and theorization that the women knowledge producers of the Grand Duchy engaged in, and something that we may still need today. Progress in democratization must expose and undermine the barriers to equality inherent in existing forms of democracy.