

Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and Swedish Perspectives

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CONTENTS

7 Introduction

KARIN SPORRE

ECONOMY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

20 Human Dignity and Economic Globalization

H RUSSEL BOTMAN

35 Economic Equality, Civic Traditions and Human Rights

ULF MAGNUSSON

DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

54 Human Rights, Citizenship and Welfare: The Swedish Model

LARS PETTERSON

77 Curbing Women's Suffrage.

Expectations, Apprehensions and Strategies

JAN GRÖNDAHL

102 More Representation or More Participation?

Challenges in Swedish Democracy

ERIK AMNÅ

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

128 Pretending Democracy. Learning and Teaching
Participation in Two Swedish Schools

ÅSA BARTHOLDSSON

142 Women in the Church. Solidarity in Suffering
in the Context of HIV/AIDS

MIRANDA PILLAY

164 Othering from Within – Sometimes Other,
Sometimes Not. On being a Young Turk in Sweden

JUDITH NARROWE

RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

179 Freedom of Religion and the Equality and Dignity
of Women. A Christian Feminist Perspective

DENISE M. ACKERMANN

194 Trinitarian Anthropology, Ubuntu and Human Rights

NICO KOOPMAN

GENDER ISSUES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

208 Different Space for Action – a Way to Understand Rape

STINA JEFFNER

220 The Vanishing Father. Changing Constructions
of Fatherhood in Drum Magazine 1951–1965

LINDSAY CLOWES

245 A Profile of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Human Rights

KATHY NADASEN

A HUMAN RIGHTS CULTURE

274 Sentiment and the Spread of A Human Rights Culture

J P ABRAHAMS

288 Women's Human Rights in Sweden – a Feminist Ethical Perspective

KARIN SPORRE

311 On a Human Rights Culture in a Global Era.
Some Ecological Perspectives

ERNST M CONRADIE

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CURBING WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

EXPECTATIONS, APPREHENSIONS AND STRATEGIES

BY JAN GRÖNDAHL

Among other things, democracy is often defined as equal rights for all adult citizens to vote and to be eligible as candidates in general elections. But, for groups of people that have previously been denied them, achieving these rights is one thing, and having a real opportunity to exercise political power, another. Sometimes such groups manage to transform constitutional rights into successful political influence; sometimes they remain almost as powerless as before. When the latter is the case, two of the most important human rights are neglected in practice, i.e. Article 21 (1) and Article 2 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives” and “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. [...]”. Usually this neglect is also followed by a general neglect of the needs and rights of the group in question in various other fields.

This is a paper on Swedish experiences of the expectations and apprehensions before the first democratic elections and what then followed. It describes how a local, male political establishment tried to persuade the women to vote, and to vote for them, and how they later neglected the female part of the electorate, when they had found that there was nothing to be upset about or scared of. Though my study deals with the events in one single town, this pattern occurred all over the country. In order to understand how and why things developed the way they did, it is often necessary to make a detailed study of what actually happened. In many cases, this can be done only by studying a small and well-defined location.

Background

The local elections in March 1919 were the first in Sweden with universal suffrage for both men and women. It was more than two years later that the first democratic parliamentary elections took place. In accordance with the Constitution, universal suffrage to Parliament could not come into effect until there had been a new election and the bill on universal suffrage had then been confirmed once again by the new parliament. On the other hand, the rules concerning local elections could be changed immediately. The local government elections in 1919, came, therefore, to be the first democratic elections in the history of Sweden.

Before 1919, the right to vote in local elections depended on income and financial circumstances. Furthermore, the number of votes the voter had at his disposal varied between one and forty, depending on how wealthy he was. Now the principle was equal rights for all adult citizens and one person, one vote.

The 1919 electorate was three times as large as in the previous elections. A vast majority of those who were now entitled to vote for the first time were women. In many towns, women constituted about 60 per cent of the total electorate.

As far back as 1909, general suffrage for men in parliamentary elections had been initiated, though only to the directly elected Second Chamber of the Swedish two-chamber Parliament. The result of the following elections to the Second Chamber in 1911 was a clear majority for the Liberals and the Social Democrats, the two parties who worked for universal suffrage to all political assemblies in the country. The indirectly elected Conservative First Chamber, on the other hand, strongly opposed such a change. In the spring of 1918, the Liberal and Social Democratic coalition government proposed universal suffrage. In the autumn of the same year, after revolutions in Germany and Russia, civil war between the “reds” and the “whites” in Finland and political disturbances within Sweden itself, the Conservatives gave up their resistance.

The elections, both those to Parliament in 1921 and the local ones in 1919, following the constitutional reforms meant a double breakthrough. The labour movement would now be able to exercise political power corresponding to the number of followers it had. At the same time, women achieved full civil rights. But the effects of these two big changes were very different.

After a few years the Social Democratic party had emerged as the leading political power in Sweden and, from early 1932 until 1976, it almost continuously formed the government of the country. On the other hand, women held a very small percentage of the seats in the different political assemblies. Roughly, though women in the 1920's and 1930's constituted a majority of those entitled to vote and about 45 percent of the actual voters, they won only 1.5 per cent of the seats. Moreover, the number of female political representatives did not increase, but on the contrary decreased, during the first decade after universal suffrage was introduced, and reached its lowest point in the years around 1930. Men occupied close to one hundred percent of the leading and most influential positions on all levels, in the political assemblies, as well as in the political parties. On different boards and committees dealing with matters such as poor relief, child care and primary school issues etc. some female members had seats, while they were non-existent in the bodies that handled finances and technical matters.

This, of course, caused a lot of disappointment among politically active women as well as discussions between both men and women in all political parties. What were the reasons? Roughly speaking, there was a male and a female point of view, though many women also took the male standpoint, or at least thought that it also had some relevance.

The male standpoint was roughly that the low representation of women in politics was due to their lack of interest, capability and knowledge. The female standpoint was that men usually did not want them in politics and systematically opposed them, both in the daily work and in the nomination procedures.

My study

My own research in this field, on which this paper is based, describes and analyzes what happened in the politics of the Swedish town of Gävle, when the first local elections with universal suffrage took place, and also what happened in the following years leading up to the next local elections. It is a historical study based on the minutes of meetings of political parties, women's political organizations and the City Council. Another group of sources are the four daily newspapers in Gävle. I have also used electoral registers, records of the counting of votes and official statistics. The study is based on literature to a

limited extent only. When this is the case, there are references in the text. The quotations have been translated into English by me. At the end of this paper, all sources that have been used are listed.¹

Gävle

In 1919, Gävle, with a population of a little more than 36 000, had the fifth largest population of Swedish towns. Gävle is situated on the coast of the Baltic Sea about 180 kilometres north of Stockholm. Since the Middle Ages, the town has been an important port. It was one of the first industrialized towns in Sweden and also an early center for the popular movements of the 19th century, such as the temperance and labour movements (Åberg, 1975, p36 f). The Conservative party governed the town but even before universal suffrage there were quite a few Liberal and Social Democrat members of the City Council. The Liberal party traditionally had a stronghold in Gävle. The dominating workers' party in both the whole of Sweden and in Gävle were the Social Democrats. In 1917, the left wing broke away from the party and organised the Social Democratic Leftist party. In the elections in 1919 and the early 1920's, these two parties co-operated for tactical reasons under the same name, i.e. the Labour party.

More women than men lived in Gävle. Many of them had quite recently moved to the town in order to find work for a living. More than fifty per cent of Gävle's adult women were either unmarried or widows. Most of them were poor people. Some worked in industries, such as the textile and tobacco industries, but most of them made a living in different kinds of service occupations, e.g. as housemaids, housekeepers, laundresses, waitresses, cleaners and seamstresses. Until then, very few men had probably paid any attention to their opinion on political matters. Now women constituted 58.5 per cent of the electorate in Gävle.

In fact, there were a few female members on the City Council even before these elections. Women who were both liable for personal income tax and had a high enough income or fortune had the right to vote in local elections. This was a very small group. Since 1910, such women also could be elected to the

1 My research in this field mainly took place, and was presented in papers, and discussed at seminars, at the History Department of the University of Uppsala, in Sweden as far back as 1982 and 1983. In 1989, a more popular version was published in print. My works are listed in the bibliography. Since then, some new research in this field has been published, which, in some respects, shows results quite similar to mine, but those studies have very rarely been used as sources or references in this paper.

City Council. In Gävle, three women were elected in 1910, and just before the elections in 1919, there were two, Anna Sundbom, who was a Conservative and Elsa Bengtsson, who represented the Liberals. Both were elementary-school teachers.

The situation of women in general

The fact that female suffrage was introduced did not mean that women were considered equal to men. Until 1920, the husband acted as his wife's legal guardian, and that concept then remained for a long time in the minds of many people. Women were still excluded from most public offices (Carlsson, 1980, p 494). Their wages were often about half of those of men in similar occupations. If they married or became pregnant, they often lost their employment.

The utopian ideas on women's emancipation in the early Social Democratic movement, to be achieved through equality at work and collective solutions to the problems of child minding and housework, had by this time been replaced by a dream of the future, where working-class women could also be merely housewives. The income of the husband should be sufficient to provide for a family (Hirdman, 1983, p 33 ff). A consequence of this ideology was that the great differences in wages between men and women, and the idea that men should have prior claims on jobs in case of unemployment, were ideologically legitimized. The great numbers of women who were responsible not only for their own livelihood, but also for that of their children or other relatives were ignored.

Political women organizations and movements in Gävle

In the early 1920's, the women's organizations connected to the Liberal and Conservative parties were stronger and more independent of their parties than their Social Democratic equivalent (Quist, 1978, p 208 ff). Not until 1920 did the party approve the formation of a national Social Democratic women's organization. In Gävle there was a Conservative women's organization that could muster more than a hundred members at its meetings. The local Conservative party organization also had female members on their board, executive and other committees. The Liberals had a local women's organization as well and women who sympathized with the Liberal party dominated the rather big local committee for women's suffrage. As early as 1903, a Social Democratic

women's club had started in Gävle, but its activity had ceased during the late 1910's and early 1920's and it did not reappear until 1923.

During the spring of 1918, there was a food shortage in the whole of Sweden (Carlsson, 1980, p 480 ff). At the beginning of March, women organized meetings and demonstrations against the authorities' way of dealing with the situation. A lot of letters to the press, signed by women, were also published on the matter. The local committee for the supply of provisions, which organized the rations, admitted mistakes and promised to improve its work. In the election campaign one year later, this "Women's Fair Distribution of Provisions Movement" and how it was treated emerged in the agitation. These events are the only independent activities of a political nature conducted by working-class women that I have found in the sources from Gävle prior to the 1919 elections.

There are reports from meetings on one more matter, where the active participants all seem to have been female, in this case Liberal women: the movement for peace and for support of the American president Woodrow Wilson's peace program. Of course, there also had been meetings earlier for the cause of women's suffrage, but these had ceased after the parliamentary decisions on the matter. The various temperance movements also engaged a lot of women, but in these almost all the leaders still seem to have been men. In the two local political issues that gave rise to most meetings and press debate, namely the housing shortage and the lack of public transports between the town center and its two largest suburbs, no women are mentioned in the sources, with the exception of one letter to the editor of the labour-movement paper, *Arbetarbladet*.

The newspapers in Gävle

During the election campaign of 1919 in Gävle, the parties had mainly four different ways of getting in touch with the electorate: leaflets, meetings, man-to-man agitation by the active party members and propaganda in the press. My opinion is that the papers were the most important of the instruments available in the different campaigns. Four daily newspapers were published in the town, the Social Democratic *Arbetarbladet*, the Liberal *Gefle Dagblad*, and the two Conservative papers: *Gefle-Posten* and *Norrlands-Posten*. Thus, all parties apart from the left-wing Socialists had at least one newspaper each (In Hadenius, 1982, p 195 ff the newspapers in Gävle are discussed). With the exception of *Norrlands-Posten* the papers also seem to have been completely at the disposal of each of the parties for their election campaigns.

The elections in Gävle 1919

Anxiety and expectations prior to the local elections in 1919

The dominating subject of discussion during the election campaign in Gävle in 1919 was women's suffrage and its consequences. There were a lot of meetings and also articles in the papers on how voting was arranged and about the legal rules for elections. The different parties also arranged quite a few meetings, discussing different issues that women were supposed to be interested in, and trying to mobilize them. The parties seemed very uncertain of how women were likely to vote and whether they would vote at all. Would the parties that had forced universal suffrage through Parliament be rewarded? Or would the women, as the Conservatives hoped, be negative to party disputes and the politicization of practical local affairs and, as *Gefle Posten* recommended, say "No" to trouble and strife in politics, as they were used to doing in their homes and, therefore, vote to maintain the status quo, i.e. for the Conservatives? Would the Social Democrats, as they feared, have difficulties in mobilizing working-class women to the same extent that the non-socialist parties would mobilize "their" women? The uncertainty was considerable and the result was that the parties focused to a great extent on the tasks both of making women their supporters and making them also actually go to the polls.

Many men from the working classes were now for the first time also able to vote in the local elections. This was not just the first women's suffrage election; it was also the first election where the workers, merely by using the power of their greater numbers, might possibly gain a majority of the seats on the city councils and other local political assemblies all over the country. This of course caused a lot of expectations as well as apprehensions and, together with the uncertainty about the consequences of women's suffrage, left its mark on the election campaigns.

The Liberal and Social Democratic parties at this time governed Sweden together. This had consequences also for local electioneering in Gävle, where these parties very rarely attacked each other. The Social Democrats mainly agitated against the Conservatives, not so much I think, because of any expectations of winning Conservative sympathizers, but in order to make the working class join in full numbers, and by doing so, overthrow the Conservatives' power. The Liberals also mainly attacked the Conservatives. These two parties competed to a large degree for the same voters, i.e. the middle-class inhabitants of the town.

Voting by proxy

Women's suffrage did not mean that all women could be sure of having the opportunity to decide for themselves on how to vote. In 1919, voting by proxy was still accepted to a great extent and with little control. People could cede their right to vote to another person in blank. Each person entitled to vote was allowed to cast one such vote as well as his/her own vote. Furthermore, married people could vote on behalf of their husbands or wives. Thus, it was possible to have access to a maximum of three votes. At the next elections, this type of voting by proxy had been prohibited.

In practice, voting by proxy deprived many women of their franchise. Husbands often considered voting on behalf of the family members to be their business. Even worse was perhaps a phenomenon that directly translated was called "fishing for proxies". The parties sent out proxy collectors and they were not always scrupulous in their methods.

Arbetarbladet accused the Conservatives: "people who were in dependent positions, such as shop assistants, housemaids, odd-job men, caretakers etc. were often forced by their superiors to give them a proxy to vote" (*Arbetarbladet* 26/3 1918). *Arbetarbladet's* opinion was that especially women were exposed to such pressure and that this would be a disadvantage for the Social Democrats in the elections. Unlike the other parties, the Social Democrats also urged the women in various appeals to vote in person.

We do not know if and how voting by proxy influenced the election in Gävle. We do not even know how many proxies there were in the town. But we can be quite sure that the result was affected, as there are figures from other towns showing that around 70 per cent of the women's votes were cast by proxies, compared to less than 25 per cent of the men's.

Nominations

All four parties realized that they must have at least one woman nominated high enough on the ballot paper for it to be certain that she would be elected. But in this new situation, it was not easy to know which positions would be safe seats in that respect. It seems to have been a matter of course that, in the future also, politics should primarily be an occupation for men. What should interest the women was which men it would be. But a few women should be elected too, in order to be representatives for their sex and also to be useful on suitable political committees, especially those dealing with educational and social issues.

The Conservatives had the least difficulties with the nomination of women. Anna Sundbom had been member of the City Council for almost a decade. She was placed in such a position on the ballot papers that she could be sure of being reelected. The party expected that its number of votes would probably decline. Many very qualified councilors most likely would lose their seats. Still the party put one more woman in a position where she would be elected if the party achieved at least a reasonably good result.

In the local Liberal party organization, on the contrary, the nomination process resulted in an open conflict. Elsa Bengtsson was placed in a position that would secure her re-election, but a couple of the leading members of the local organization for women's suffrage, were placed so far down on the Liberal's ballot paper that they would not be elected unless the party was very successful. In consequence, some of the Liberal women introduced a rival ballot paper, with only women on it.

The Social Democrats had great difficulties in finding any woman candidate at all for the City Council. At this time, there was no activity in the women's club but, in order to find candidates, the party summoned a women's meeting, in which about twenty female members of the party participated. The men in the party were severely criticized by Signe Johansson, chairwoman of the meeting. In spite of what was stated in the party's program, the men had shown no interest in having women participate in politics. On the contrary, they had always preferred women to stay in their homes, "but now when they need us they suddenly demand that we choose candidates amongst us" (Socialdemokratiska föreningen, minutes, 5/2 1919).

In the local party organization, there was an opinion that it would be hazardous not to nominate at least two women in such positions that they would have a fair chance of being elected, but it now turned out that all the female candidates suggested refused to be nominated. And Knut Bergsten, the leading Social Democratic politician in Gävle, did not have very flattering opinions about women in politics. He claimed that, where women's suffrage had been introduced earlier, it had proved that: "they had not been as much benefit as expected" (Socialdemokratiska arbetarkommunen, minutes 30/1 1919.)

After several meetings, at last two women agreed to be nominated. One of them, Ester Östlund, cashier in the local co-op store, was placed in a position on the ballot paper that would probably guarantee her election.

Arbetarbladet wrote: "Our female party members thereby get a candidate who is well qualified to meet our expectations" (*Arbetarbladet* 6/3 1919). This meant that the largest group in town, of working-class women, was supposed to be satisfied with one representative from their own ranks of the total of 45 on the City Council.

The Social Democratic Leftist party was the most radical one also in nominating women, as it put Mrs. Augusta Jonsson at the top of their ballot paper. She was the only woman nominated by the party that had a chance of being elected.

Arbetarbladet in the electioneering campaign in 1919

Arbetarbladet's argumentation directed towards the women mainly followed three different lines. The first focused on fairness. The Conservatives had fought against women's suffrage. Now the women should punish them for that. *Arbetarbladet* published several statements made by the Conservatives opposing women's suffrage. The Conservative party was derided for now wanting the female votes.

The second line focused on class. Working-class women should not fail to vote because the better off women would not do that. This argument was also intended for working-class men. They should be aware of the importance of persuading "their" women to go to the polls.

The third line had its background in the idea that all women had a certain character by nature, and that they therefore were interested in and suitable for certain issues and tasks in politics. Thus *Arbetarbladet*, and the other newspapers as well, were studded with articles on issues such as provisions, housing, education, medical care and social welfare. In these articles, numbers of demands that would probably appeal to women were brought up.

Two men, who were the leading persons in the local Social Democratic party organization, managed *Arbetarbladet*. The above-mentioned Knut Bergsten, general manager of the newspaper, was also leader of the party's group in the City Council and a member of Gävle's finance department. He also had a seat on the party's national committee. Nils Sigfrid Norling, editor in chief, was also chairman of the local party organization.

A Social Democratic platform for local politics

The articles mentioned above had an agitating tone and did not link up with local conditions, but in no less than ten long articles discussed local politics. The first seven of these all had the same headline: "How have the Conservatives governed the town?" and contained a detailed critical examination of the politics conducted during the preceding decades. The Conservatives were accused of favoring private economic interests at the expense of the majority of the population. Things like housing, public transports and schools for the children had been neglected during the pre-war years. And now, after the great inflation that started in 1914, the cost of necessary measures would be much higher. The present situation was in some respects described as a catastrophe.

In articles eight and nine, *Arbetarbladet* then submitted a municipal Social Democratic policy for Gävle. The first of the articles concentrated on how to deal with the housing shortage. The next presented a long list of reforms primarily in the fields of health care, support of provisions, education, poor relief, pensions and local communications. It is quite clear that the common theme consisted of proposals that would probably interest and attract women. This was hardly a coincidence and neither was the vague specification of when all this would be implemented.

The tenth and last article in *Arbetarbladet*, discussed how all the above could be financed. Different kinds of new or increased taxes on different activities, mainly such that better off people were probably interested in, dominated the Social Democratic list of proposals in order to increase the municipal revenues.

The paper did not hesitate to proclaim, in a big advertisement-like appeal: "Now is the time, when everything that the Social Democrats have fought for for decades can be achieved, if all working-class men and women go to the polls in the local and regional elections" (*Arbetarbladet* 19/3 1919). But on the very next day, there was a less conspicuous article, which pointed out about how restricted the powers of the local authorities were, and how narrow the economic limits.

The Conservatives

The Conservative paper *Gefle-Posten* replied to the charge. *Arbetarbladet* was accused of being wise with the benefit of hindsight. Nobody could have foreseen the war and the inflation. The list of demands was described as impractical and expensive experiments rather than realistic policies. The paper joked about

the great joy of being a taxpayer in the town if all the demands were put into practice. Only Parliament could change the laws on municipal taxes and the other proposals on how to finance the reform program would have very small effects. “*Arbetarbladet's* magic wand for transforming the town was just birdlime meant to catch unsuspecting voters” (*Gefle-Posten* 22/3 1919).

Gefle-Posten argued that municipal decisions should not be politicized and that the experienced and capable (Conservative) men, who until then had led the town, should be entrusted once again. It was important that the Conservatives get at least 1/3 of the seats on the City Council. If so, they would be able to stop new kinds of expenses and also all expenses calling for financial loans. Furthermore, all kinds of decisions could be postponed. Then the town could be protected from “the superior numbers of the ignorant and non-taxpaying” (*Gefle-Posten* 1/3 1919). At the same time as the introduction of universal suffrage, some restrictions intended to protect minority interests had been introduced in municipal legislation.

The Conservatives did not bring up any specific municipal policy, or make any promises of reforms or other changes. But it is clear that they had similar ideas to those of the Social Democrats on what kind of political issues were suitable for women to be interested in. On many occasions, *Gefle-Posten* urged women to be the champions of unity and reconciliation also in politics, just as they were supposed to be in family life.

The arguments in *Gefle-Posten* varied a lot. On the one hand, the paper warned women that class egoism would lead to “a government where public matters would be handled by incompetent people who would only be interested in their own personal welfare” (*Gefle-Posten* 19/3 1919). And there were some notices like “remember the misery in Russia” (*Gefle-Posten* 17/3 1919) and “first there will be a Kerenskij and then comes Lenin” (*Gefle-Posten* 17/3 1919). On the other hand, there was self-criticism from Conservative women on how the party had handled the issue of women’s suffrage, and the fact that the Conservatives, also, were anxious to relieve social misery was pointed out. Several times the paper pointed out that the party had more women well placed on the ballot paper than any of the other parties.

The Liberals

In the liberal paper *Gefle Dagblad* the agitation was more subdued. The polemics were mainly directed against the Conservatives and the arguments were to a large degree the same as those used by *Arbetarbladet*. The paper seems to have considered it natural that the workers would come to vote for the Social Democrats. The Liberals competed with the Conservatives for the same part of the electorate and they saw themselves as the representatives of the enlightened and progressive middle class, while the Conservatives were considered to be spokesmen of a dying, unjust society based on privilege. In *Gefle Dagblad* the new women's suffrage was the dominating issue in the election campaign.

The Social Democratic Leftist Party

This party had no local paper. Instead, it tried to make itself visible in the press through advertisements and letters to the press. For example, they turned directly to the working-class women of the suburb of Bomhus in an advertisement and declared that the women "had been met with scorn from right-wing politicians, both non-socialist and the Social Democrats" (*Arbetarbladet* 26/3 1919). They also claimed that their candidate, Augusta Jonsson was the only working-class woman who had a realistic chance of being elected.

Arbetarbladet answered that it was a lie that the women arranging meetings about the shortage of provisions in 1918 had been treated badly. On the contrary, the Social Democratic party organization had made great efforts in order to help them in their struggle.

The local election in Gävle in 1919 – results and participation

The "Labour party" received 51.9% of the votes, and of those the Social Democrats had 45.5% and the Leftist party 6.4%. The Conservatives got 25.3% of the votes, and the Liberals got 22.7%. This meant that the Social Democrats won 24 of the 45 seats on the City Council. The Leftist party had two seats, the Conservatives, ten and the Liberals, nine. Participation in the election in Gävle was 63.4% of the men entitled to vote and 57.7% of the women. It is worth noting that the highest female participation was achieved in two of the most markedly working-class districts, where it was 64.7% and 62.3%. In these two districts, the women's participation was higher than that of the men.

These results made Gävle one of the 15 towns where the elections had resulted in a Socialist majority. The Conservatives had lost more than 50 per cent

of their seats, all of them to the Socialist parties, while the Liberals got exactly the same number of seats on the Council as they had before. This, of course, was a great disappointment for a party that saw itself as the true champion of the universal suffrage reforms. Three women took their places on the Council, Anna Sundbom and Elsa Bengtsson, who both already had seats and Ester Östlund, the Social Democratic candidate. Augusta Jonsson, although she was the first name on the Leftist party ballot paper, was not elected. Too many voters had canceled her name. The Liberal ballot paper with only women on it was unsuccessful, and did not win any seats.

Local politics in Gävle 1919–1920

Social Democratic policies in a majority position

The task for the new Social Democratic majority was not an easy one. Just a few days after the elections, they also made clear that they were aware of this fact. A long article in *Arbetarbladet* put a damper on the joy of victory and the expectations of rapid reforms. Work had to be concentrated on efforts to improve the town's finances. The party's guiding principle for the future was caution and a strict economy. Those who had feared or hoped that the new majority would carry through experiments or show lust for power would soon realize that nothing of the sort was to be expected.

Gefle-Posten and *Gefle Dagblad* gave these new directions a very positive reception. At the very first meeting of the new City Council, it was obvious that they were seriously meant. At this meeting, the Conservative President of the Council, Oscar Flensburg, was re-elected and the Social Democrats also refrained from putting themselves in a majority position on the executive committee that led the work of the Council. *Arbetarbladet* argued that it was a good thing that, as a result of these decisions, the Conservatives would have to continue in a position of responsibility for the town's finances. The paper also gave credit to the leading Conservative local politicians, something that the paper did not say before the elections.

The discussions can be followed in the internal records of meetings of the Social Democratic City Council group. There were two opposite lines. The first emphasized that the party had a responsibility towards its electors to use its power to take over the presidency and the executive committee and that it would be dangerous not to do so. The line described above was the second, and this one, supported by both Bergsten and Norling, achieved a large majority.

There were several reasons for choosing this policy. The financial situation was one but the party also thought that the administration still needed the competence of the Conservative politicians and feared a Conservative opposition that could become obstructive. Another reason was to moderate anxiety among the better off groups in the town. The fact that important changes in policies had to be supported by 2/3 of the councilors probably also influenced the decision, though this is not expressed in the records. Actually the Social Democrats were not quite certain about where to start and felt that they needed some time to get used to the situation and to develop a concrete strategy. Extensive internal work of investigation, as well as planning, was immediately launched.

Nine months later, in November 1919, the party was ready to strengthen its positions. When the elections to various, different boards and committees took place, the party wanted one of their own, Knut Bergsten, as chairman in the borough finance department. This made the President of the City Council, Oscar Flensburg, decide to resign and so a Social Democrat was elected to that office, also. Still, a few months later, when Flensburg was interviewed in a Conservative paper published in Stockholm, *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, he stated that no important change in town politics had taken place, and that the new majority had considered the economic problems more seriously than he had dared to hope before the elections.

It is also quite clear that on all the committees except for the finance department, there was still a majority of Conservatives and Liberals even after the elections in November. The Social Democrats concentrated on getting control of the finances in order to be able to lower the municipal taxes, while the old political establishment continued to run the rest of the administration. The leading men of the new majority concentrated their efforts on strengthening the competitive capacity of the town and its port in order to entice industries and other enterprises as well as ships to come. Some planning and preparation of how some of the promises made in the election campaign could also be realized were made, too, but very little happened in these fields during the period leading up to the next local elections. The most developed plans were about improving housing, but so far they had only resulted in a very small number of new dwellings. In general, the living conditions of the population had not changed except for the lowered municipal taxes.

This cautious policy of economic compromise was also reflected in the way the newspapers dealt with local public issues and the City Council meetings.

Arbetarbladet, especially, regularly wrote about how to improve housing and local communications, but in spite of that, the general picture is that the press wrote less and less about local politics. For example, in the first few months after the election, the papers reported in detail on the City Council meetings and sometimes also on various committee meetings. Gradually, the reports then became briefer and at the same time the paper's own discussions on the different issues also vanished. Nobody discussed the aims and means of local politics in the same way as before the election in 1919. In 1920, the papers appear to have lost practically all their former interest in local politics. Municipal issues seem to have been made non-political and conflicts seem to have been removed from the agenda. The Conservative vision prior to the elections appears to have come true.

The role of women after the election

The great interest in the women's debut in politics also vanished rapidly after the election. The elected women all seem to have been put in rather insignificant positions, both within their parties and in the local government. There are no signs of interest in what these representatives of the majority of the population did to be found in the newspapers. I think it can be explained as if a mental "all clear signal" was sounded. The women obviously had not voted to any significant degree in a different way from how the men had. They had not promoted women and canceled male candidates. No party had become more favored or threatened by their entrance on the scene, and they seem to have accepted the fact that they had only a few representatives from their own ranks, and also that these were kept out of real power.

An important, though so far in political practice very carefully used, shift in power had taken place, the achievement of a majority for the working-class parties. This shift took place almost totally within the framework of the male local political establishment, whereas the greatest change in the electorate, the majority of women, was well nigh invisible in the policies that followed the election.

When, for once, a female politician attracted attention, it was by using words that would have been impossible to write about a man. *Arbetarbladet* wrote under the headline "An attack of hysteria in the City Council" that "little Miss Sundbom was seized with what she perhaps thought was legitimate anger" and that "this pretty representative of the female weakness of mind" (*Arbetarbladet* 31/12 1919) had accused a Social Democratic councilor of having lied in the City Council.

Yet Anna Sundbom was probably the most influential of the three elected women. She had been a member of the poor relief board for many years, and she also had a seat on the local board of her party. The female Social Democratic councilor, Ester Östlund, seems to have been extremely passive. In the records of meetings of the Social Democratic group of councilors there is not one single remark made by her and at many such meetings she was not even present. I suppose it was not easy to be a young inexperienced woman among 23 men, led by Bergsten, who was skeptical of female political representation. The female Liberal representative, Elsa Bengtsson, left the council as early as the beginning of 1920 because of illness. On the other hand, the second woman on the Social Democratic ballot list, Anna Hallin, took a vacant seat on the City Council. She did not achieve any influential position either.

The elections in 1920

The election campaign in 1920

In December 1920, local elections took place once again in Sweden. This time only half the City Council was elected. Voting by proxy, in the extensive and badly controlled way that was allowed in 1919, was now forbidden. As these elections were spread over a couple of weeks, i.e. on different days in different towns, in places where the elections were still to come, people could discuss the results of the elections in other places, and their consequences. Participation in the election seemed to decrease everywhere and the Conservatives were successful. These two conditions left their mark on the election campaign in the newspapers in Gävle. Time after time, *Arbetarbladet* returned to the question of why the workers fought for suffrage for decades, and then when they got it, did not use it. As time went by, the tone of these articles became more and more whining and grumpy. "Some people in the working classes become tired and give up at the first setback. The Social Democrats were in government for a few months and couldn't conjure up a Socialist society, and then some people lost their inclination to make any efforts at all for the labour movement." (*Arbetarbladet* 9/12 1920).

Very few articles in *Arbetarbladet* in the campaign of 1920 were directed at women, and those that were had quite a different tone from the year before. Women should understand that they could influence the elections and that now was the proper time for them to pull themselves together, and show that they wanted to take part in exercising power. Voting in general, as well as voting

for the right party, was almost described as an obligation. I am not sure if the editors really believed that this kind of sour-tempered campaign really would mobilize working-class women. They probably thought that they had no better arguments. Unlike in 1919, there were no articles about the tasks of women in politics and no proud declarations about all the aims that could be achieved if the working classes went to the polls. And there were no great promises to accomplish a local welfare and reform policy this time.

What little debate there was, focused on what the Social Democrats had actually achieved since March 1919. *Gefle-Posten* was of the opinion that they had not been able to realize one single aim taken up in the election campaign of 1919. The tone in *Gefle-Posten* was quite good-natured and indulgent. Actually the paper was rather satisfied with the fact that the Social Democrats had been so reasonable.

Arbetarbladet answered that the party had been in power for only a year and a half, that taxes had been reduced and that the economic situation was very difficult. During the decades to come, the town would continue to suffer from the consequences of the former Conservative rule. The paper also wrote, that many steps had been taken in order to carry out various different reforms in the future, but it did not specify any examples of these.

The concrete issue that seems to have dominated the election campaign was public transport. The inhabitants of the suburbs, at meetings and in the press, expressed great dissatisfaction with how this was handled. The town had recently bought an icebreaker to serve the needs of the port and the Social Democratic Leftist party claimed that that money should have been spent on building tramways to the suburbs, instead. The Social Democrats answered that keeping the port open was a question of life or death for the town.

In an appeal in *Gefle-Posten*, the Conservatives brought attention to the fact that two Conservative women had chances of being elected, if the party was as successful in Gävle as in other places. They especially attacked the Liberals for having no woman at all with a fair chance of being elected. *Gefle-Posten* had great expectations of the election. The kind of articles that flourished in 1919, about ignorant and non-taxpaying voters, had disappeared in 1920 and so had the articles about the moderating influence of women on politics. Just as in *Arbetarbladet* the tone used against the opponents was more temperate than in 1919, except for in one single article. *Gefle Dagblad* also wrote that the Social Democrats had achieved very little during the time they governed the town.

Nobody seems to have organized the type of meetings intended to mobilize women that were so frequent in 1919, or if they did, the papers did not report them. The space used for articles, appeals and advertising the elections, as a whole, was much less in all the newspapers this time. Of course, there is a connection between the lukewarm electioneering and the “making the municipal issues non-political” described above. The Social Democrats could hardly once again attack the lack of local welfare policy and the Conservatives and Liberals could hardly try to pursue a policy of dissatisfaction with the lack of such changes. The only real opposition, though without having any newspaper at their disposal, came from the Leftist party.

Nominations in 1920

The Conservatives once again nominated Anna Sundbom, and one other woman, Anna Åkerberg. The Liberals and the Social Democratic Leftist party nominated no women with a fair chance of being elected. The Social Democrats, this time also, had great difficulties in finding anyone who agreed to be a candidate. Neither of the two women who had represented the party on the City Council wanted to be re-elected. Though at last, Anna Hallin, after an appeal to her loyalty to the party (she was daughter of the most famous working-class leader in Gävle’s history), was persuaded to accept nomination.

The election in 1920 – results and participation

Participation decreased substantially. Only 39.3% of the men and 21.8% of the women went to the polls. The last figure, especially, was very low compared to other Swedish towns. The Socialist parties lost their majority. Actually the Social Democrats lost, and the Conservatives gained seats, while the other parties remained on about the same levels as before. The Social Democrats had 40.4%, the Leftist party, 5.9%, the Conservatives, 30.5% and the Liberals, 23.2%. As only half of the Council was elected this time, the Social Democrats were able to maintain a slight majority. Only two women were elected, Anna Sundbom and Anna Hallin. Too many voters had deleted Anna Åkerberg’s name from the ballot lists.

Arbetarbladet wrote: The electorate of the party has shown “an unforgivable dullness... not less than 4/7 of our voters remained invisible.” (*Arbetarbladet* 15/12 1920).

The background to the low female participation was primarily an extremely low participation level among certain categories of women. Among the many unmarried female industrial workers, the percentage was below ten percent and it was also very low among the wives of workers in other occupations than industry, (with its well-organized trade unions). Also very few daughters and other unmarried women members of families, who were not gainfully employed, participated.

Analysis

What were the reasons for this decrease? There were probably several factors involved. Of course the disappearance of the proxy vote lies close to hand as an explanation. If so, the participation of women in 1919 would be considered artificial and the percentage of 1920, normal. In order to put this standpoint to the test, let us take a look at female participation in the three following elections or other opportunities to vote: the parliamentary elections in 1921, the referendum on the prohibition of the use of alcohol in 1922 and the local elections in 1922. In the first two of these events, female participation was on about the same level as in 1919. In 1922, it once again fell to a very low level: 43.9% for men and 26.8% for women (this time the whole of the City Council was elected). Thus, it is quite clear that many more than 20 percent of the women entitled to vote would, in fact, also go to the polls if they found the elections or referendums interesting enough. In 1920, only 7.7% of the unmarried female industrial workers in the working-class district of Brynäs in Gävle participated, but one year later in the parliamentary elections, the same category participated to a degree of no less than 80.8%, which was substantially higher than the male vote in the same district and for men in the town as a whole.

It seems that the electorate in Gävle, especially the women and, to an even higher degree, the working-class women, lost their commitment to local politics. This is quite understandable considering what happened in 1919. Many people must have expected reforms and improvements after that election. The ensuing development must have created some disappointment and loss of faith in what could be achieved by local political commitment. Also in the records of meetings of the Social Democratic local organization, the disappointment is clearly visible. In the internal elections, prior to the nominations in 1920, all the leading men got few votes.

In 1919, three women were elected to the City Council in Gävle. After the elections in 1920, there were only two and, in 1922, only one was left, and she had already become a councilor in 1911. During the years 1911–1934, altogether nine women were city councilors. Four of them were Social Democrats; two were Liberals and three, Conservatives. Of these nine, seven served only one term of office (in a few cases a little shorter or longer). One Liberal councilor served two terms. Only one, Anna Sundbom, was re-elected several times.

It is quite clear that most of these women felt uncomfortable in the male establishment of local politicians. Otherwise, most of them would not have left it as soon as they could. Men, on the other hand, seem to have been re-elected, or at least nominated for re-election, practically for the rest of their lives, once they had become councilors. It was not until the close of the 1930's that the situation improved a little. In the 1940's, a woman, her name was Hildur Nygren, held a leading position for the first time in the politics of Gävle as she was elected to the City Council's executive committee. About a decade later, she actually also became one of the very first female members of the Swedish government.

Parliamentary elections and the referendum

There was an important connection between the struggle for women's suffrage and the temperance movement in Sweden. At this time, women seldom used alcohol and men's drinking habits were often seen as a curse that sometimes changed life from hard to unbearable (Lundkvist, 1977 p 184 ff). That fact that the question of the prohibition of the use of alcohol was considered to be a "women's issue" is confirmed on many occasions by *Arbetarbladet*. In an article about women and the coming referendum, it wrote that women were those who were capable of making an unconfused judgment on this question.

In the light of these facts and of how local politics had developed during the recent years, it is not surprising that the political expectations of the women of Gävle were transferred to the Parliamentary elections and the referendum. The elections in 1921 were a great victory for the Socialist parties in Gävle. The Labour party (i.e. the Social Democrats and the Leftist party in co-operation) received 62.2% of the votes, i.e. over ten percent more than in the victory of 1919. The Conservatives got only 17% and the Liberals, 20.8%. It was quite clear that the high personal participation of women in the elections favored the Socialist parties (Many scholars think that female participation in elections at

this time should have favored Conservative parties, instead, e.g. Eduards, 1972, p 24f and 47 ff, Palme, 1969, p 44 ff, Quist, 1978, p132 ff, Tingsten, 1937, p 229 ff). One of the reasons for this was probably that the Conservative party opposed the idea of the prohibition of alcohol most strongly. It also seems clear that the extensive practice of voting by proxy in 1919 had been to the advantage of the Conservatives, just as *Arbetarbladet* had suggested. Actually *Gefle-Posten*, judging by its comments on the results of 1921, seems to share this opinion. The paper claimed that, as there was no voting by proxy in this election, the Conservatives should be quite content with the result.

In the referendum in 1922, the champions of prohibition lost on the national scene but, among the women voters in Gävle, æ voted in favor of prohibition, as did more than 90% of the female voters in the working-class suburbs.

Concluding remarks

In the Parliamentary elections of 1921 to the Second Chamber, four women were elected and to the First Chamber, just one. In the referendum, those who wanted prohibition lost. Thus, also on the national level there were good reasons for women to feel disappointed at the beginning of the 1920's. Female political representation all over Sweden, and on all levels, then declined during the following decade.

The backlash was probably related to important changes in Swedish society that took place in the 1920's and 1930's. The housewife had become the female ideal in all classes and the number of marriages increased rapidly. There was less demand for women on the labour market than previously and they were often considered to be competing with the men for the jobs available. This was, of course, due to the high unemployment rates in these decades. Many men were of the opinion that they needed the jobs better than the women, as they were supposed to be the family breadwinners. Thus women, both for ideological and economic reasons, were pushed back into the kitchens. And surely there is a connection between women's participation in the work force leading to economic independence as well as presence in all fields of society, on the one hand, and their chances of demanding and exercising political influence, on the other.

Furthermore, a number of issues that had engaged many women in the early 1920's disappeared or became less important. The shortage of provisions came to an end when the First World War was over. The temperance movement lost the referendum on the prohibition of alcohol. The struggle for universal

suffrage had also come to an end. And the peace movement faded away, when the peace treaties after the war were concluded, and President Wilson's visions had been rejected by the American Congress.

Women were nominated to political assemblies, but only a few, and quite seldom those who had been struggling in the suffrage movements. Among those women who had believed in a new and better world after women's suffrage had been introduced the disappointment was great (Palme, 1969, p 109, Quist, 1978, p131, Torbacke, 1969, p145, Wahlström, 1939, p 62 ff). Wahlström was a leading member of the Swedish women's movement for suffrage, but also a professional historian and she was the first to write the history of the movement). Men decided who the women they wanted to allow in would be. The result was that many of the female politicians in the 1920's and 1930's tended rather to be loyal party members than feminists. Their assigned task was to mobilize women for their respective party in the elections. Solidarity among women had no place in a political environment, where class was defined as the superior factor, and sex an insignificant one, except when it came to deciding who should exercise power. Then sex was of paramount importance. The consequence of all this was that, for decades, women's suffrage in practice had so little effect, that it was almost as if it did not exist.

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