

# Hedwig Dohm, Women's Right to Vote (1876)

## Abstract

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Hedwig Dohm (1831–1919) was married to Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Dohm, editor of the satirical journal *Kladderadatsch*. In a career spanning more than fifty years, Dohm published novels and plays but remains best known for the ironic and sharp-witted essays that she wrote between 1872 and 1879 on the subject of women's rights. The following excerpt is from her essay "Women's Right to Vote," which appeared in the collection *Women's Nature and Rights* [*Der Frauen Natur und Recht*]. Here, she argues for female suffrage with impeccable logic, offering a point-by-point refutation of common arguments, such as "Women do not want the right to vote" and "Women do not need the right to vote." In the final lines of the essay, Dohm embraces the cause of political equality in more passionate tones, calling on all women to oppose "gender despotism."

## Source

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(Pages 57ff, 67ff)

[...] In Germany, the women's question [*Frauenfrage*] has not yet reached the level of serious discussion. Ridiculed by the ill-intentioned, although mockery has never been a touchstone of truth, pushed aside by the well-intentioned as a minor issue for the time being, the women's question is still in such a state of infancy in our parts that—how stunningly naive—even Social Democratic papers agitate against women's right to vote with catchphrases that could have been borrowed from the [ultraconservative] *Kreuzzeitung*, catch phrases about the dissolution of sacred family ties.

It has been left to Germany to produce these social philistines, these moral harlequins, who unfold a purple banner emblazoned with the most splendid principles of purest democracy with one hand and crack a whip at half of humanity with the other.

One freethinker from the American South summarized his political creed as follows: "All men are born free except niggers." [1] [...] Much greater is the deficit of human charity and logical reasoning power that those charlatans of democracy display by excluding women from voting. Certainly, only a small fraction of Social Democracy agrees with this prostitution of its own principles. Why then does the great Socialist party not disavow those who hold such convictions and send these desperadoes of conviction off where they belong: in the editorial department of the *Kreuzzeitung* or similar places? Once having gained power, anyone who does not want women's independence will destroy that of his fellow citizens. [...]

Thus, the very same arguments that we have been forced to recognize through the political emancipation of the dispossessed, of workers, and, most recently, of the Negroes also apply to the political rights of women.

The reasons men give (against women's right to vote—the editor) are:

1. Women do not need the right to vote,
2. Women do not want the right to vote,
3. They are incapable of exercising it,
4. A woman's sex naturally excludes her from any type of political activity.

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**First Reason: Women do not need the right to vote.**

This means: Men have been so just, so kind, so noble since time immemorial that one could confidently commit the fortunes of half of humanity to their pure hands. [...]

This means: Regardless of whether they belong to the barbarian or the civilized world, men are driven by an innate desire, a divine impulse, to protect woman in her rights and happiness. All the malevolence of scoundrels, all the despicable acts of knaves, all the vices of fellows both elegant and poor have always been directed against their own kind. Only in confrontations of man against man has the stronger sex harmed and ruined itself in the struggle for existence.

Woman stood apart on a pedestal, and when man beheld her, the temptations of vice fell silent in his bosom and a spring of virtue opened up. — Never has any man cheated on a woman, raped her, murdered her, or driven her to death and desperation.

Women do not need the right to vote—no—they do not need it in Arcadia, in Utopia, and in all those fairylands and dream worlds that little children and sometimes even great men believe in.

And what about the judgment of history? Women's history is but a history of their persecution and their lack of rights, and history says: Since time immemorial, men have oppressed women in outrageous and unheard-of ways; and human reason adds to this: And they will continue to oppress them until women participate in drafting the laws that govern them, for each law that is not backed by an authority is a dream and a phantom. — A quick glance at the status of women among civilized and barbarian peoples is enough to offer clarification on the male care that has been granted to the female sex from cradle to deathbed since time immemorial. [...]

(pp. 92ff)

[...]

It is a very old ruse of despotism to disparage and degrade its victims in order to justify their oppression. [...]

It is true, however, that times have improved, and that it is no longer customary for a brother to sell his sister, a father to deprive his daughter of her share of an inheritance, and a mother to be placed under the guardianship of her son; and yet a woman's lot continues to be difficult enough. Even today, as in the old days, women remain dependents—for life.

The dominance of man over woman has become milder, but marriage continues to be a near absolute and legally guaranteed form of rule by man, and even to this day, a young girl of marriageable age is not much more than a commodity to be inspected, traded, and purchased.

But how could it be that—even the law might be against women? Does not our Prussian common law begin with the words: "All Prussians are equal before the law"?

Indeed, all of them are, only with some minor exceptions—for instance, the following ones: According to German law, by consummation of marriage a woman, together with all her possessions, came and still comes under the guardianship and authority of her husband, provided that she has not covered herself contractually. The community of property is considered so natural in Prussia, and in most German states, that an exclusionary agreement requires public announcement. Whereas the husband has unrestricted power to dispose over property and the wife can raise no objection to her husband's administration of her property, she is not entitled to dispose freely over their common property.

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A young girl who was married under the law of community of property (and this constitutes the general rule) to a man without means whom she enriches may fall victim to indigence, if her husband is miserly. Perhaps she will be forced to obtain her own money for bare essentials bit by bit by begging from her husband, and thus practically live on alms despite her wealth.

She is also unable to act independently on her own account with respect to the last will and testament. Whereas the husband encumbers the common property with any debts he accrues, the wife's debts are not paid back from that property. The wife may not purchase anything without her husband's permission, and whatever she does acquire belongs to the husband. Her head and fingers belong to him. She is not even allowed to pawn her jewelry without his consent; she cannot obtain a passport without his written authorization. If an abused wife seeks shelter in the home of a family with whom she is friendly, the husband can force her, repeatedly, to return; he can starve her to death, and she will have no legal grounds for urging him to provide the necessary food and water. In Hamburg, a woman still needs a guardian to undertake any legal action. [...]

Since time immemorial, the power and grandeur of motherly love has inspired words to pour forth from the human mouth in writing and speech, in prose and verse, but after the father's death, the mother is not regarded as the natural and rightful guardian of the child. The father's consent is replaced with that of the legal guardian. The father is primarily entrusted with arranging the child's education. Only he is invested by law with rights regarding the children's wealth. [...]

The unpunished crimes committed against women in the area of sexual relations are incredible (just imagine for a moment the statistics on seductions and their horrible history) and shameful for human society. One only has to think of the fact that prostitution is the basis for the morality of our society. This is the monstrous product of a corrupted society that imposes vice on the female proletariat for the benefit of well-to-do and sheltered women; it makes the female proletariat the pariah of the moral world and condemns the members of this class to pay the price for the virtuous ornamentation of the prosperous classes of women. Indeed, that constitutes moral swindling of the most brazen sort. [...]

The man seduces the woman, he plunges her into misery—and the laws make her the seducer's accomplice and finish her off. In the history of humanity, woman has always played the role of special redeemer of man. She, nature's lamb, takes his sins upon her—though she may collapse beneath the cross.

The laws men have made are the pure and unadulterated expression of their attitudes toward women; everything else is a pack of lies, empty phrases, and affectation. These laws, however, seem to exist only for one purpose, namely to prove the civil inaptitude of woman; they assume that woman is bad, weak, and unreasonable, whereas man is strong, intelligent, and a paragon of virtue. If men regarded women only as weak and not bad and unreasonable at the same time, laws like the ones mentioned would be reprehensible twice and three times over, for is it not the obligation and responsibility of the state to protect the weak against the strong? Such laws as exist, though, give to the strong the sharpest and most cutting weapons against the weak and defenseless.

[...]

(pp. 107ff)

### **Second reason: Women do not want the right to vote.**

[...] One cannot deny, however, that a large part of the female world—in Germany certainly the majority—attaches no value to gaining political influence. But it by no means follows that participation in the drafting of legislation is something that women can dispense with. To be sure, Negroes have never demanded civilization, and so far Oriental women have not exhibited any desire for monogamous

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marriage.

Nevertheless, no one will declare slavery and polygamy to be worthy institutions, and everyone will admit that civilization is preferable to barbarism and monogamy to polygamy. The value of these goods would immediately register with the affected parties if the latter were put in a position to enjoy their benefits. Anyone trained to servitude, like slaves and women, will recognize the inestimable value of freedom only slowly. Furthermore, when one considers the extent of women's dependence [on men], the considerable number of them who support voting rights is quite remarkable after all.

There may be districts and municipalities of men, where, on average, less than half of them go to the polls. In those cases, then, the majority would have spoken against the right to vote, and the right to vote would have to be taken away from these districts and municipalities as a result. Who would think of such a thing?

If even a single woman demands the right to vote, then it is an act of violence to prevent her from exercising her civil duty.

The motives prompting women to either directly oppose the right of their sex to vote or to at least remain indifferent on this question are very simple and very clear.

First, the great multitude of people, all the simple and mediocre minds, never embrace any idea or conception that has not yet gained currency in public opinion and has not yet made its *tour de monde*. The majority of humans do not budge an inch from the customary opinion in their country, generation, or town. That majority is satisfied with honorable mediocrity and with moving at a sleepy trot along the well-trodden avenue of conventional customs; they doze leisurely from the here and now into the hereafter. Clinging to authority is and will always be the religion of all half-wits, intellectual idlers, and devout souls. The conception of an independent woman is too new, the implications of the idea too immeasurable for the majority to understand, let alone agree with it.

But are customs beyond criticism just because they are generally accepted? Should the present always follow in the footsteps of the past? Are we automatons that can only be moved ahead externally through the machinery of acquired social dogmas constructed for us by previous centuries?

No, time sanctifies nothing at all, and each belief has only an individual sanctity that is tied to a certain time and place. [...]

Secondly, no woman of uncharitable disposition—whether she be dumb, intelligent, or witty—will follow the banner of women's liberty. Those who find themselves in comfortable circumstances, and who are also equipped with sufficient doses of egotism, will be careful not to pull someone else's chestnuts out of the fire, for they know one thing: Conflicts with fellow humans are very unpleasant, whereas peace of mind, fine dinners, spa vacations, and box seats at the theatre are very pleasant.

"I have everything I need," says the wife at the side of her loving husband, who has many excellent qualities, one of which happens to be a fat wallet.

Certainly, my dear madam, that is not the issue, however; the issue here is the wife of the drunkard who knocks her to the ground in the most bestial manner, condemning her and their child to death by starvation so that he can indulge his vices. The issue here is the young girl who violates her nature and proceeds to marry a man she does not love for the sake of securing her livelihood and to escape the misery of an empty and lonely existence. The issue here is the old maid who crawls through this vale of tears on earth without friends or joy, bent over her needle day after day. Oh yes, the issue here, my dear madam, concerns many other women of whom you never knew or wished to know at all.

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In response to the highest and most wonderful of Commandments—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself—human egotism has always had the answer of indifference in store: “Lord, am I my brother’s keeper?” [...]

Thirdly, resisting that which one depends on requires a courageous heart, a joyful conviction. Women, however, are dependent on men. How many women in Germany have a husband who supports women’s right to vote?

If today we announced a meeting to promote women’s political rights, hundreds of women who share our views would stay home, because their husbands do not wish for them to attend such gatherings. They would stay home out of fear of their masters or for the sake of peace, or to coax this or that out of their husbands by remaining obedient.

In the fourth place, the women of the common classes are generally among those who do not desire the right to vote; this is because they lack insight and education, and because, as a rule, prejudice has an even stronger effect among the ignorant than the educated. Common women are unable to recognize why the table of life has not been set for them. If the proletarian wife writhes in pain under the heavy blows of her drunken husband, she does not know that the law legitimizes the actions of this fellow. If the woman living in sin with a man (not through her own volition but according to his will, for just how much she would like to be his lawful wife!) finds herself thrown out onto the street with her children, she is not aware of the fact that the laws are on his side. [...] The law is always on his side if he disowns his biological children, taking as many mistresses as his carnality desires, with no concern for their subsequent fate. The half-crazy mother given to infanticide does not suspect that the laws could protect her from the horrible deed in which, often enough, her soul has no share at all.

We have admitted that, for the time being, a large part of the female world does not desire the right to vote. Does it follow, however, that women who do not want the right to vote are superior to those who do? Certainly not. Just as the men who do not exercise their political rights are not superior to those who participate in public life.

If our adversaries are right, however, and if, generally speaking, women really do not want the right to vote, there is no need for a regulation to exclude them. — Whoever needed a legal regulation to force people to follow their own inclinations!

Women do not want the right to vote. I understand it may be welcome, very welcome for the person governing to assume that the governed is happy to obey.

To the good ladies who do not want the right to vote, however, men offer their knightly chivalry as a form of compensation, threatening the political women with its withdrawal. [...]

Incidentally, it seems to me that the effect of this deterrent is problematic, for experience suggests that when chairs and arms are offered, or umbrellas and corner seats in train compartments, they only benefit pretty young ladies; whereas the discomforts suffered by old maids and women who are no longer young and beautiful are incompatible with inspiring the stronger sex to knightly behavior. — Therefore, these women—and they represent the majority—are not really affected by this question and can ridicule the threat.

### **Third reason: Women are not capable of exercising the right to vote.**

Surely, we are not required to discuss this argument seriously.

In no country is the right to vote predicated upon any physical or mental characteristic. The weak and the sickly, the crippled, the stupid, the brutes—and in the United States the uncivilized Negroes—all are

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eligible to vote. Finally, with respect to universal suffrage, this argument is simply absurd. Any woman who can read and write has skills that place her above an illiterate man.

Just ask any of England's jurists. These gentlemen would hardly be able to defend the theory of feminine ineptitude without shame and blushing, since two English ladies recently won England's two top legal awards, beating out their numerous male competitors. [...]

Governor Campbell of Wyoming (the first American state to grant women the right to vote) submits a satisfactory report to the legislative assembly of the territory of Wyoming on the political effectiveness of women. He says:

"It has been four years since the first legislative assembly in Wyoming dared the experiment of granting women a voice in government affairs. I have already taken the opportunity once before to comment on the wisdom and justice of this measure and to express my conviction that the results of this measure can be characterized as absolutely favorable. Two additional years of observing the practical effect of the new theory have only served to deepen my conviction that what we have implemented was correct." [...]

**Fourth reason: A woman's sex naturally excludes her from any type of political activity.**

Woman has no claim to political rights by virtue of being a woman. This goes without saying; it needs no more explanation than the equation  $2 \times 2 = 4$ .

Who says so? — Man.

How does he prove it?—No proof is needed, since this innate conception was given to men by God.

Whoever insists upon proof will be confronted with our feelings, ones that actively reject the notion of a politically emancipated woman, and the voice of feeling is the voice of God.

But which feelings? What are the feelings based on? — Based on reason and justice or prejudice and egotism? It is appropriate to examine these questions.

Your feelings are insulted. You believe in woman's mission in the household as much as or even more than in God Himself; but how can such intense, glowing belief, such high moral ecstasy have evidential value to me if they are not supported with infallible reasons? Reason scorns all of belief's fervor, it tears stars from the orbits that prejudice has pre-ordained for them; it has fought victoriously with dragons, giants, and devils; it drives gods from their thrones. In the face of its triumphant flash, even the ancient belief in women's proper sphere will dwindle away.

Because she is a woman.

What does that mean, to be a woman?

It means having a different physical composition than a man. The difference concerning the mental capacities of the two sexes remains indeterminable for the time being, and men, the proprietors of creation, would do well to hold back a bit in their attempts to evict the political thoughts that a woman may be harboring in her brain. They would do well to hold off with their charges until scientific substantiation becomes the measure of scientific truth, taking the place of vociferous attachment to subjective inspiration, metaphysical prattle by old philosophers, poetic witticisms and traditions that spring from fantasy, all of which constantly appear on the agenda whenever the nature and peculiarities of woman are discussed. For the time being, we have to assume that a sex which, as Fourier emphasizes, boasts more great queens, proportionally speaking, than men do great kings is not at all without political sense.

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If one allows the principle that a different physical composition necessarily causes different moral and mental capacities, then where should one draw the line? — We might just as well accept the superstition that all humpbacks, as individuals marked by God, should withdraw into the obscurity of private life; that all lame persons are relatives of Beelzebub; that all redheads are traitors; and that all blacks are slaves. And, indeed, in the dark centuries of the Middle Ages people inferred moral characteristics from physical peculiarities. In early medieval France, women who gave birth to twins were found guilty of adultery and sentenced to death. Old women were burnt as witches in droves—on account of red-rimmed eyes.

The claim was: The woman who bears twins is guilty of adultery.

The claim was: Woman, because she bears children at all, is tainted with political impotence.

The principle at the root of both conceptions is the same: A physical process is arbitrarily given a moral or mental basis. Since women bear children, they are not supposed have any political rights.

I maintain that because men do not bear children, they ought not to have any political rights, and I consider one assertion as profound as the other.

You have no political rights because you are a woman! You have no political rights because you are a Jew! That is what human society has called out to Jews for centuries. You have no political rights because you are a Shudra (a man of the people, of the lowest caste), decrees the Indian civil code, and if you concern yourself with politics, you will be punished severely. You have no political rights because you are Black and a Negro, says the slaveholder to the slave, and because you are Black you are my slave and your children belong to me and I may sell them.

Why? Because you are Black.

What is a Negro? What is a Jew? What is a woman? What is a Shudra? They are oppressed people.

Oppressed by whom? — By their brothers who are stronger than they are.

Cain and Abel! Abel was the first victim to fall in the struggle for survival. — Could it be perhaps that the last Cain and the last Abel will die only when the last pair of humans have died as well? [...]

Because she is a woman. This means because she is the mother and caregiver of the child and no other activity can possibly exist in conjunction with this sacred duty.

A profound view.

As if the best mother were the one whose every action and thought revolves only around her child! As if the best jurist were one who does nothing but read law books his whole life, or the best physician the one who does nothing but dissect corpses and study pharmacology. Just as surely as a one-sided study of a very narrow subject will produce nothing but obstinate scholars or scientific tradesmen, an inner life that revolves entirely around the kitchen and the children will usually produce a woman who is imprisoned by a kind of blind motherly love and a limited daze; these are of no benefit to the child, and all the more often are harmful to its body and soul.

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When men speak of the female sex, they only have a very particular class of women in mind: the lady.

According to that well-known bon mot by that well-known Austrian nobleman,<sup>[2]</sup> human beings begin only with the rank of baron. In much the same way, it could be said that, for men, the female sex begins only when women dress up, make conversation, and display a fondness for amorous intrigue and box

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seats at the theater.

Go out into the fields and the factories and preach your theory of separate spheres to the women wielding pitchforks and to those whose backs are bending under the force of heavy weights! Can you create a comfortable home for all women and a husband who provides for her? No, you cannot. Are all of you worshippers of the theory of spheres married, and have all of you married poor girls in consideration of providing for the female sex? No, you have not done so. Well, then, away with you fabricators of spheres, make room and air for millions of creatures born healthy in mind and body who are wasting away because they are women. [...]

Is there any truth to your claim that the family is the woman's vocation and that the state and its welfare rest on the basis of the family? If that is your honest opinion and not just an empty phrase, then you must malign and disdain every unmarried man as a traitor against nature and a wrongdoer against the state, and you must never again open the doors of your chambers to him. [...]

Domestic responsibilities are incompatible with political responsibilities.

How noble it is that our legislators feel such pressure to urge women to fulfill their domestic duties.

Why, however, do legislators not ensure that the man meets his private and professional obligations as well? Why do they not order each married man to be taken home by the police as soon as the clock strikes 10 p.m.? Why do they not see to it that clubs, restaurants, and other wicked places shut their doors at closing time so that a hangover, a cold, or a hypochondriac mood does not prevent the civil servant, the artist, or the merchant from exercising his professional duties the next morning?

How can one have the audacity to believe that a woman who manages to achieve freedom will have nothing better to do than neglect her duties, when one entertains no such suspicions in the case of a man?

Who is entitled to ask for reasons when stupid belief reigns supreme? Domestic and political responsibilities are incompatible.

For all these naive men believe that the reason women cook and sew so well is because they do not have the right to vote. And in every woman tainted with the right to vote they see the archetypal councilor of confusion, a woman they deem capable of adding newspaper pages rather than parsley leaves to soup and of boring fish with political speeches rather than frying them. They have absolutely no doubt, however, that there is a link between deficits in housekeeping money and the involvement of women in tax and budget matters.

How is it, though, that the scientific, industrial, or artistic employment of a man goes so well with his political activity? Does one deem composing immortal Wagnerian operas, painting canvasses in the style of Kaulbach and Richter, authoring numerous learned volumes, and participating in the exciting game at the stock market less time-consuming and significant than the cooking, sewing, fluttering, wrangling, and washing of children done by women? And aren't these gentlemen of the quill, the paintbrush, and the stock market prepared at all times to fulfill their political duties without writing, painting, speculating, and meditating less often and less well for that matter? [...]

If voting is unfeminine, then it is also unfeminine to pay taxes; it is unfeminine for a widow to feed her children through the toil of her hands; it is unfeminine to go begging, etc. Habit turns things into second nature in such a way that even the warmest heart and the wisest mind overlook their senselessness, harshness, and injustice. [...]

Because she is a woman. This means because political and scientific activity, because the development



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of intelligence would likely rob woman of the female charms that men regard as one of life's pleasures and to which they feel entitled.

This view, taken to its logical conclusion, ends in the harem. [...]

(pp. 159ff)

We have discussed several major reasons advanced by men against women's right to vote; now let us turn to some of the arguments upon which women base their political demands.

1. Women demand the right to vote as a right to which they are naturally entitled.
2. They demand it as a moral necessity, as a means to refine themselves and humanity.

[...] The central point, however, is this: Granting the right to vote equals a step across the Rubicon. Only with the granting of women's right to vote can we begin to agitate for those magnificent reforms that represent the goal of our efforts. Participation in political life will open up all other questions.

### **[1.] Women demand the right to vote as a right.**

Why should I first have to prove that I have a right to this?

I am a human being, I think, I feel, I am a (female) citizen of the state; I do not belong to the caste of criminals, I do not live on alms; this constitutes all the evidence I have to furnish in support of my claim.

In order to exercise his right to vote, a man requires a certain place of residence, a certain age, and some property; why should a woman require more?

Why is woman put on the same level with idiots and criminals? No, strictly speaking, not criminals in fact. A criminal only loses political rights temporarily, so actually only women and idiots belong to the same political category.

Society is not authorized to deprive me of my natural political right, unless this right would prove incompatible with the welfare of the body politic. We must call for proof of that antagonism between the body politic and women's rights. One will probably let us wait until Judgment Day, and in the meantime refer to the divine judgment that has characterized woman as an apolitical being because she lacks a beard.

In the long term, the prerequisite that one class of people carry the burdens of citizenry without having the right to shape these burdens in any decisive manner, the prerequisite that one class of people be subject to laws in whose formulation they do not participate, makes sense and is possible only within a despotic state. Permitting a principle like this spells tyranny in all the world's languages and for both of the sexes, for any man and woman alike.

The claim to political equality of the sexes in the parliamentary chamber and the spectators' gallery seems to men a moral outrage and exposes them to the danger of violent fits of laughter. They readily acknowledge one type of political equality, however: equality before the scaffold.

Why did you not laugh, dear gentlemen, when Marie Antoinette's and Madame Roland's head fell under the guillotine? "In a state," says Mme. de Stael, "where a woman gets her head cut off in the interest of the state, shouldn't she at least know why?"

Men never give answers to such know-it-all questions.

And why should they?

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The voices of the dispossessed and the powerless are swallowed by the wave of the great stream of life—without any echo. Only when women have gained the right to vote, will their wishes, their happiness, and their opinion carry any weight in those places where the fortunes of classes and nations are weighed.

Men derive their rights vis-à-vis women from their power over them. But the mere fact of dominance is not a right. By law, they determine all of the measures, customs, and hierarchies that serve the suppression of the female sex, and afterwards they call these arrangements a legal order. Yet injustice does not shrink after a law has sanctioned it; oppression is no less despicable, but rather all the more horrible, when it has such a universal character in world history. [...]

As long as the formula is: man wants and woman shall, we do not live in a state based on the rule of law but in a state based on the rule of force.

And as long as man is an irresponsible legislator for woman, conditions will essentially remain just as they are now. [...]

Women are not asking for a show of mercy, they are not begging for privileges, they are not begging for charity or alms. They demand justice.

Any woman bound by laws that others have drawn up without her participation is well within her rights if she refuses to pay taxes. Indeed, in England and America women have already gone ahead and refused to pay them. [...]

Women are demanding the right to vote because they are tired of oppression, hypocrisy, and degradation; they demand it because they have a right to have their voices heard in the drafting of laws that affect their social status and individual rights. Each class has its particular character and is more familiar with its own circumstances than those who are not subject to the same.

Society says that men represent women.

When did woman transfer that mandate to man?

When did he account for his decisions to her?

Neither the one thing nor the other has ever happened.

If women are not in agreement with this representation, then a claim like the aforementioned one constitutes an insulting social improvisation by men; mockery in the face of actual circumstances. Referring precisely to the same right, the absolute king may claim that he represents his people, or the slaveholder that he represents his slaves. It is an old argument that workers ought to be represented by their employers; but this argument has failed to convince workers, who have vigorously rejected this representation. And women are supposed to accept it? Nevermore!

Women demand the right to vote because any class that does not share in political life is oppressed; over the course of time, however, participation in political affairs must necessarily result in equality before the law. The classes that are not allowed to exercise the right to vote are controlled by the other classes that are free to do so. This principle has always been accepted so unanimously by all the liberal parties that its denial vis-à-vis women is almost incomprehensible. [...]

The logic of politics is absolute. Either a people [Volk] is sovereign and consequently women are as well, or all of us are subject to a lord and king.

We can only revert to despotism or move forward towards a purely democratic state, which accepts the basic principle that, as part of the sovereign people, women have an inviolable claim to full equality with regard to civil and social rights.

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I acknowledge nothing that others do not acknowledge in me as well. There is no freedom of men if there be no freedom of women.

If a woman cannot bring her will to bear, then why should a man be allowed to do so?

If each woman has her own tyrant under the law, then the tyranny that men experience at the hands of other men leaves me cold. One tyrant simply serves for another.

And why do women so patiently tolerate this lack of the most natural of all rights?

Very simple: They have to, because they have no power to obtain these rights by force. [...]

## **2. Women demand the right to vote for the sake of the moral effects.**

The moral effects of the right to vote deserve as much consideration as the political ones. Women's participation in political affairs means a general elevation of woman's intellectual level; it signifies her intellectual and material independence.

The narrower the field in which a person must practice an occupation, the less significant the interests to which that person is forced to devote his or her life, and the more paltry that person's intellectual life will likely be. [...] Being cordoned off in this manner not only leads to dwindling intellectual energy and situations and mental outlooks characterized by sad monotony, it almost always also results in the weakening of moral character. [...] What is left to a woman? — The satin robe and the Indian shawl, the arts of coquetry and the staging of her charms, if she wishes to advertise herself a bit. After all, humanity is addicted to advertising. Since her inner values do not win her any influence, she concentrates her talents on externals.

How is it that men complain about the money their wives spent on toiletries? [...]

If a woman does not command a strong mind, she will, by virtue of confinement to a lesser sphere, become enslaved by those manners and vices of servitude that she needs to make her situation bearable. She requires cunning, hypocrisy, intrigue, and flattery. Just how often has the striving of a nobly disposed and highly talented female spirit been curtailed by the pernicious influences of her situation? For any human being, no matter how excellently disposed, is capable of degeneration.

Men's despotism condemns woman to corruption. To this day, women have no share in the affairs of state, and prostitution flourishes in cities and on the countryside alike.

[...]

Men, the good Lord's policemen, force women's thoughts into the spheres of lower contemplation, and she takes revenge on society's despotism by making herself an encumbrance to human progress.

[...]

In all fairness, we cannot completely blame men for not wanting to tolerate women being at their side in state affairs. We consider it perfectly natural that they should stubbornly cling to their gendered privileges. Did any estate or class ever relinquish privileges of any kind voluntarily? We consider it perfectly acceptable if they do not wish to cook the soup and tend to the little children; even among the most intelligent men, the notion of women's participation in the state is inseparable from the idea that part of own their energies would have to be spent in kitchens, nurseries, and washhouses, as a form of compensation.

We are not directing our bitterest sentiments, our harshest accusations against men, but against women

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who cowardly tolerate being shoved aside by one generation after another. Any prouder mind and any braver female heart rebels against the women who are satisfied with the freedom to cook and sew to their heart's content, who shrink into insignificant nothings before men; against the women who sacrifice their lively minds and hearts, time and again, on the altar of the veneration of men, who still tolerate it when Griselda, that picture of misery, that fool of feeling and reason, is presented to them as the paragon of perfect femininity; and who, once they are no longer suitable for serving man's lust and benefit, live, without grumbling, on society's charity in some quiet corner, even though they might be in full possession of their mental faculties for decades to come.

Those women who do not want the right to vote thus relinquish the highest levels of human development and declare themselves a subordinated category of the human species. They may continue to live on the crumbs that fall from the tables of their lords; they may continue to kiss the hand that beats them, and identify with and take pride in the medals and offices of their lords and masters. And if the heavens bestow new titles upon their husbands, let them turn up their noses and raise their souls up high and impress their sisters with that delightful uttering: I, too, am privy councilor now! There have always been subservient characters, and there always will be.

[...]

It is a matter of rescuing all of you women from the sad and dull tedium, from the monotony of your miserable existence. [...] Shake off the character that convention has forced upon you and break through this state of subservience that used to be synonymous with womanhood.

Rise up and demand the right to vote!

[...]

Wake up, women of Germany, if you have a heart to feel the sufferings of your fellow sisters and tears to weep over them, even though you yourself might rest in the bosom of happiness.

Wake up, if you have enough fury to feel your degradation, and enough sense to recognize the sources of your misery.

Demand the right to vote, for the right to vote is the only path toward independence and equality, toward freedom and happiness for women. Without political rights, you are powerless in the face of the most incredible crimes committed against your sex, even if your souls might overflow with compassion, kindness, and magnanimity.

Pull yourselves together! Organize yourselves! Show the world that you are capable of enthusiastic dedication, and rouse the conscience of people, stir their hearts, and convince their minds through your deeds and words!

Rely not on the assistance of German men! We have only few friends and supporters among them. [...]

Be brave, for God helps those who help themselves. Think of the brave words of the American Emerson: "Always do what you are afraid to do."

All you poor women and victims of gender despotism, thus far you have been traveling on the sea of life without rudder and sail, and therefore you have rarely reached the shore; and most of the time, the ship of your happiness has foundered due to calm or storm.

Let the right to vote be your rudder henceforth, your power be your sail, and then confidently entrust yourself to the sea, its storm, and its cliffs, and sooner or later you will catch sight of land, the land you

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have been “looking for with your souls” for centuries, millennia even, the land where women do not belong to men but to themselves.

When the Englishman Somerset brought along a slave from Africa to England, Lord Mansfield declared, despite the prejudice of the times, that the slave was free for the simple reason that no human in England could be a slave.

Therefore, women are free as well, because within a state of free humans no serfs can exist.

Human rights have no gender.

## NOTES

[1] Quoted in English in this way in the original German text—trans.

[2] Prince Clemens von Metternich—trans.

Source: Hedwig Dohm, “Das Stimmrecht der Frauen,” in Hedwig Dohm, *Der Frauen Natur und Recht. Zur Frauenfrage zwei Abhandlungen über Eigenschaften und Stimmrecht der Frauen*. Berlin, 1876, pp. 57ff, 159ff. Available online at:

[https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/dohm\\_frauenfrage\\_1876](https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/dohm_frauenfrage_1876); reprinted in Margrit Twellmann, *Die Deutsche Frauenbewegung im Spiegel repräsentativer Frauenzeitschriften. Ihre Anfänge und erste Entwicklung*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Quellen 1843–1889*. Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1972, pp. 535–56.

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