

The Employment of Women: Conservative and Liberal Views (1872)

Abstract

As traditional gender roles changed, women's suitability for particular kinds of employment became a significant issue. In this excerpt from a debate on the floor of the Reichstag, Postmaster General Heinrich von Stephan (1831–1897) lays out the conservative position. Stephan argues that female “delicacy” leaves women without the assertiveness needed to deal with customers at the post office and railway ticket booths. As he suggests, women must be spared wrangles with traveling salesmen and ill-mannered servants. Jumping into this heated discussion, the left-liberal deputy Dr. Wilhelm Löwe stresses women's need for—and right to—independence, even in the face of state prudery: otherwise, he argues, women would be faced with the unacceptable alternatives of prostitution or continued underemployment in low-paying jobs. But given the latter concern, there is some irony in Löwe's claim that women show greater facility than men in the role of telegraph operator.

Source

Postmaster General [Heinrich von] Stephan:
[According to Postmaster General Stephan:]

Women are hardly suitable for work at transport facilities [i.e., railway, post, and telegram offices]. They might, however, be better suited to keeping books and registers in courts, recalculating building designs in architects' offices, or working in municipal service.

Thus far women have been hired only when absolutely necessary, that is, when no men were available on account of low wages. The prerequisite was that these women possessed the same intellectual abilities as men.

“Work at these facilities, under all circumstances, means exposure to the public sphere, and I would like to spare the fair sex that experience for reasons of delicacy. The exchanges that can be heard between postal officials and traveling commercial clerks! The battles that occur between pack masters and bellboys who come to the post office, etc.! The fact is that we do not just deal with an educated clientele: the post office serves far too many types to assume that when a lady sits behind the counter she will always be met with polite manners.”

Stephan then makes reference to the “robust physical strength” needed in these facilities; “various other circumstances” that may prevent women from fulfilling their duty even though service “continues regularly and tolerates no interruptions”; the necessary authority that is difficult to maintain vis-à-vis retired noncommissioned officers and sergeants; the change of personnel caused by [maternity] leaves; the office was constantly forced to search for new personnel and train them; about one third of the staff were constantly engaged in training another third, for the ladies will eventually withdraw from their position, “which after all does not constitute women's actual calling in life. Yes, indeed, if one could erect barriers, if there were a certain age at which women were absolutely safeguarded against getting married, then settling this issue would be quite simple. But I think [...] that such an age will be difficult to find. On the other hand, to have female postal officials on the verge of employment sign binding agreements to forgo marriage would be cruel to the younger ones and would violate natural law.”

Nevertheless, as commendable as the trend in women's educational and occupational associations may be, he [Stephan] had to ask himself: "whether this entire matter was not being approached from the wrong angle. If—instead of supporting unpromising activities aimed at women's direct entry into public life, where they do not belong by nature—it were possible to focus all energy and means on helping men reach the goal of a profitable job more easily, then this would put women in a better position to get married, and surely the women would be more powerfully drawn towards their natural vocation. In such cases, they would not need to follow paths that stray from women's calling." The best provision for women at the post office, according to Stephan, was to marry a postal official.

Dr. [Wilhelm] Löwe (Progressive Party, later German Radical Party)
[According to Dr. Löwe:]

The Postmaster General did not put forth any objective reasons for not employing women, "instead [Stephan advanced] only general views about women in general, which, in my opinion, are based on prejudice."

With respect to the mixed clientele and "unseemly transactions," women should decide for themselves whether they are distasteful to them or not.

"However, as long as you provide no law that mandates good family morals—one prohibiting girls from becoming shop clerks, waitresses, or even barmaids, [one prohibiting them] from serving in beer parlors or interacting with guests in restaurants and pubs—then I believe we have no right to demand from the state such prudery as to prohibit women from standing behind a counter to receive letters simply because they might be asked to engage in conversation with traveling commercial clerks. Simply consider, gentlemen, what you would achieve by restricting women's avenues for honest occupational activity. Do you really think it is better for society and the poor if you turn them out onto the street, only to become victims of prostitution? Are they worse off getting into disagreeable commercial dealings: for example, an unpleasant conversation with some insolent customer that might injure their sense of delicacy?"

The primary source of prostitution, according to Dr. Löwe, is not immorality but poverty; when deciding about women's occupational capacity one must clearly recognize the link between prostitution and gainful employment. — Since freedom of occupation has left it up to women to test their strength and to fill positions, or fail, according to their abilities, it is out of place for us to "act like providence, [...] and first check how many nightshifts the person can take, whether her strength suffices for the work and whether she has certain characteristics that render her unsuitable for the job?" — In the case of a man, such criteria are not applied; and when it comes to gossip-mongering and vanity, these things are just as widespread among men as women—as a doctor, he knew what he was talking about!

Dr. Löwe points to positive experiences in southern Germany, especially Baden. There, Karl Mathy had hired women because they provided cheap labor—and when the Postmaster General rejected that, he agreed with him, noting that "if a woman does the same work as a man, she ought to receive the same pay and be employed in the same way as any man."

Women were particularly well-suited to the telegraph service, Löwe continued; experience in England and Baden had shown that women were more skilled than male candidates. If the Postmaster General wanted quality, he ought to consider employing women and ask them to prove the same knowledge of geography and orthography demanded of men. Afterwards, their level of bodily fitness would have to be tested.

One would also have to wait and see whether a woman got married or not, and in case she did whether she ought to relinquish her position—"after all, once hired, women are subject to the same disciplinary

regulations, and if they do their job badly because they got married, then you simply relieve them of their duties.”

Certainly, military applicants [veterans of the wars of unification] had to be taken into consideration and provided with employment, but women should have the same access as men to positions not occupied by military candidates.

“I believe it is important for the entire development of our society—important precisely with respect to the materialism of our times—that we arouse a feeling of true independence in women as well; that we rid them of the wretched idea that they must always depend on the family of their birth, unless they build a family of their own through marriage. That’s why they believe they must marry at any price in order to attain a solid bourgeois position in life. Quite the contrary, I regard it as the task of legislation and state institutions to give them the opportunity to become independent, to earn their living themselves in an honest way, because otherwise we have to fear opening the door to immorality.”

In voting on the petition, the Reichstag passed the motion specifying that the petition “be referred to the Reich Chancellor for consideration when filling posts within Reich transport facilities suitable for female persons.”

Source: Bericht über die Reichstagsdebatte am 13.5.1872 betr. Petition des Verbandes deutscher Frauenbildungs- und Erwerbsvereine um Zulassung der Frauen zum Eisenbahn-, Post- und Telegraphendienst, *Frauen-Anwalt* 3, no. 6 (September 1872), pp. 183ff.; 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. 451–53.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: The Employment of Women: Conservative and Liberal Views (1872), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-549>> [May 01, 2024].