

Speech by Louise Otto, Chairwoman of the General German Women's Association, at its Third General Assembly (1869)

Abstract

In her report to the third general assembly of the General German Women's Association, chairwoman [Louise Otto](#) (1819–1895) pointed to the long-term nature of efforts to improve women's standing and underscored the crucial role of local chapters. Otto was also pleased to note the support given to the association by a philosophers' congress and workers alike.

Source

[...]

If I had to give an accounting of the effectiveness of our association and what it has accomplished to date, I would be at a loss if we were talking about visible results. Establishing useful institutes for a rapid and obvious improvement of the lot of women cannot be the task of the General German Women's Association, at least not now, as long as it does not dispose of substantial financial means. For now that is a matter for the local associations, and striving to establish these is one of its major tasks. [...]

Providing this *impetus* is precisely one of the *chief purposes* of our association. It provides that impetus first of all by its mere existence, by the fact that through it there exists a focal point for all women who are concerned to work on solving the women's question. In the same way nearly all of us who have come here from north and south have come to know each other only since the establishment of this association, and have thereby discovered that there are like-minded and enthusiastic women everywhere who are willing to dedicate their energy to a common idea, and, by stepping out of their isolation, to find in a common enterprise the happiness they have until now longed for in vain. [...]

And so in July I accepted an invitation from the tradesmen's association [*Handwerkerverein*] in Berlin to give a speech there about the work of women in the service of humanity, which resulted in the establishment of a working women's association. [...]

Forgive me, honored attendees, if, still filled by the unforgettable experience we have just had in Frankfurt [at the philosophers' congress, which she and Louise Gutbier attended and where the latter gave a speech], I cannot but cast my eyes there and thus appear to digress from our meeting. But it only appears that way! I confess that since my early youth I have always been somewhat bold in the demands and hopes I connected with a more dignified position for the female sex – but what we just experienced I had not dared to either demand or hope for! I had never believed it possible that German philosophers, representatives, and professors of the highest profession, *would deign to welcome the participation of women at their meeting!* Last year they had already asked us to join them in Prague – at the time we did not have the courage to attend – but one of our associates who lives there, Mrs. J. Hoff, gave a speech [...]. In the face of *such* successes, the hesitation gradually evaporates also for the German woman: the hesitation whether it is now finally time to pronounce the word *self-help* as the slogan, and to join happily and confidently – even if still only carrying grains of sand – in the work of building the temple of humanity that must be erected; in the same way that our German people has always built its cathedrals from the sacrificial gifts of individuals, the sacrificial gifts of man and woman, a cathedral in which stands not only the marriage altar at which man and woman consecrate their union of love, but also the high

altar of mankind, where women and men now consecrate themselves simultaneously to serve the kingdom of God, that it may come to pass on earth. And so join with us today, so that here and today grains of sand will be carried and sacrifices made for the building of such a cathedral! – When I was able to write, below the program for this meeting, the words “at the meeting hall of the *Workers’ Education Association*,” I took special pleasure *in doing so*, I took these words as a good omen! We join the camp of work and workers, we proclaim *the sacredness of work and education also for women*, and we may hope that those workers in whose hall we meet do not see in us dangerous competitors, but sisters who have the same right as they do to think about improving their condition, hand in hand with them. And when I saw that this hall had been decorated for us in pleasant green, I welcomed this as well as a symbol: namely that if our General German Women’s Association still resembles a plant that has for now been planted only in potsherds and must be protected by us, like careful gardeners, from too much harsh air, yet it will soon turn into a tree, to bloom and bear fruit in the barren garden of mankind.

Source: Rede von Louise Otto, erste Vorsitzende des Allgemeinen deutschen Frauenvereins, bei der 3. Generalversammlung (1869); reprinted in Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, *Die Anfänge der deutschen Frauenbewegung: Louise Otto-Peters*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 198–99.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Speech by Louise Otto, Chairwoman of the General German Women’s Association, at its Third General Assembly (1869), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-449>> [September 17, 2024].