

# Klara Reichmann: “Being Allowed to Vote Means: You Must Vote” (January 1919)

## Abstract

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On November 12, 1918, the day after the signing of the Armistice, Germany’s provisional national government (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) announced that women henceforth had the right to vote. Two weeks later, on November 30, a new federal election law (*Reichswahlgesetz*), took effect that legally enshrined both active and passive voting rights for women—in other words the right to cast a ballot and the right to stand for election oneself. By early January, women were already casting ballots in regional elections throughout Germany and getting elected to serve in communal and state legislatures. On January 19, 1919, elections took place for the National Assembly (*Nationalversammlung*), which would draft the new republic’s constitution.

In this short exhortation, the suffragist Klara Reichmann argued that women had an obligation to vote, not just a right to do so. Having grown up in a prominent Jewish family in Königsberg that had encouraged her and her sister to develop their potential, Reichmann had long anticipated the day when the state would finally acknowledge that women had the same political rights as men. Reichmann’s sister, Helene Simon, had already begun political lobbying during the war on behalf of welfare reforms, and she later became a prominent social policy theorist in the 1920s. Reichmann’s daughter Frieda had pushed for women’s opportunities in clinical psychology during the war, an equally political act, given that she was one of the very first women in Germany to do so.

Reichmann and her family had participated in the long struggle for women’s suffrage, and so she appreciated the importance of exercising her right to vote at this historic moment. She expressed concern, however, that other women might not realize the decades-long movement that had gotten them to this point and might therefore simply skip the election.

In the end, Reichmann need not have worried. More than 82% of eligible female voters took part in that January 19, 1919, election, a remarkably high percentage. Moreover, 300 women campaigned for seats in the assembly, of whom 37 were elected. Despite these milestones, though, women still comprised less than ten percent of the 423 total delegates in the National Assembly, a fact that highlighted the work still needed to achieve true political equality.

## Source

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Being allowed to vote means: You must vote.

Whatever we accomplished,  
Whatever we desired,  
What we did not gain,  
Was not granted to us.

To all the women for whom the suffrage seems to have fallen into their laps like a ripe fruit, because they were indifferent or hostile to the struggle to gain it, we cannot stress enough: There are no coincidences in a development rooted in hard work. A longed for objective can be achieved slowly or surprisingly quickly, or not at all. And if this aim, suffrage for women, seems to have been achieved quite suddenly, this is solely the result of the different tempo of the individual phases of development

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throughout many years of tenacious effort.

Those of you at a far remove from this preliminary work will perhaps not be able to judge the results in the same way as those women who followed the evolution of their struggles with a sense of fear and dread, indeed almost hopelessness. What we attained through persistent and assiduous labor has been granted to you and us. Now help us to take true possession of our achievement. You are no longer faced with the question of whether you are suitable or qualified for the suffrage, but rather with the categorical demand to acquire this suitability and this qualification, so that you may use your right to vote. "You can, because you should!" And being allowed to vote means: You must vote. Women, earn your rights by fulfilling your duty!

Klara Reichmann. Königsberg

Source of original German text: Klara Reichmann, „Wählen dürfen, heißt: wählen müssen“, *Frauen-Rundschau. Beilage der Königsberger Hartungschen Zeitung*, Nr. 1, Jan, 1, 1919, p. 1.

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