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# Women, Gender, Social Movements (Switzerland)

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**This article explores the war's impact on women's economic and legal status in Switzerland, a country indirectly affected by the war. It examines the forms and directions of women's mobilisation as well as the differing reactions of charitable women's groups and the women workers' movement to changes affecting nutrition and waged labour. The hopes of women's associations that they would secure the vote in return for a commitment to soldiers' welfare and food security were dashed. The male-defined link between readiness to defend the country and civil rights became further entrenched for many years after the war. Pacifist women, on the other hand, were able to use Switzerland's special position to develop an international network.**

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### Introduction

In August 1914, Switzerland assumed, as did the belligerent states, that the war would be a short one. Since few or no provisions had been made for the social impact of war, it fell mainly to women, on the one hand, to guarantee the continuity of everyday life – working at home or in waged labour – and, on the other, to attempt to mitigate the plight of the general population via existing women's groups or newly established [war relief organisations](#). It is only recently, in the context of the centenary of the First World War, that this [mobilisation of women](#) has been given broader consideration.<sup>[1]</sup> Previous research was carried out primarily in relation to the historical development of women's groups.<sup>[2]</sup> Regula Stämpfli's study of women's involvement in national defence is still the standard reference work on this subject.<sup>[3]</sup> Among the publications that appeared around 2014, Heidi Witzig in particular focuses on women and the history of everyday life, while [Elisabeth Joris](#) focuses on the history of the women's movement.<sup>[4]</sup> The Gosteli foundation in Worblaufen is home to a wealth of sources on the women's movement and on catering for the troops.<sup>[5]</sup>

Bearing in mind the key fact that Switzerland was not directly involved in military hostilities, this article examines how the war affected women's work: [waged labour](#) in general and factory work in particular; women's duties within the family economy; voluntary work within women's associations and in the form of humanitarian aid to belligerents; and the professionalisation of domestic work in the context of catering for troops and general war relief. The goals women associated with this involvement are also explored. Although they gained greater opportunities for active participation, women were still denied equal rights. They carried a greater load at home and made a greater contribution to civil society. While the authorities expected the latter from women, and acknowledged this in public discourse, at the same time they were reminded that their place was on the "home front" or at the kitchen sink. The traditional and close association in Switzerland between *Staatsbürgerschaft* (civil rights) and *Wehrbereitschaft* (readiness to defend) played a legitimising role, reinforced by public emphasis on manning the borders to protect Switzerland from the war.

### Women's Waged Labour Under War-related Pressure

In pre-war Switzerland, women accounted for around 40 percent of factory workers, as the textile and food industries were significant employers. Many more women were employed in domestic service, retail, farming, and tourism. During the war years, the number of women in waged labour increased, albeit to a limited extent. In August 2014 approximately 200,000 men – one-eighth of the workforce – were mobilised, although this number fell rapidly afterwards. The composition of troops was planned with as much flexibility as possible to minimise shortages in the [labour](#) market. On average, soldiers spent 550 to 600 days in active service over the four war years, but even if more women entered the workforce, it was impossible to make up for the loss of the men's income:

women were paid only 55 percent of a male worker's industrial wage, and only 7 to 10 percent of female factory workers were unionised.<sup>[6]</sup>

Because Switzerland was relatively protected from the war, gender differences in relation to waged labour were different than in neighbouring countries, though gender-specific discrimination was much the same.<sup>[7]</sup> The tourist industry collapsed almost immediately, but by 1915-1916 most other sectors were enjoying a war-time boom. In particular, there was a marked increase in orders from belligerent nations for all kinds of goods. The resulting spike in demand for workers led to a relaxation of the *Fabrikgesetz* (Factory Act) that was designed to protect factory workers; restrictions on women working night shifts and Sundays were relaxed, as were regulations governing the employment of females and juveniles.<sup>[8]</sup> Munitions factories took on more women workers, but also hired a considerable number of youth, among them many girls. The number of female employees also rose in other sectors of the largely male-dominated metal industry.<sup>[9]</sup> However, the terms of work and payment for these women were largely excluded from collective wage agreements, and their positions were often precarious.<sup>[10]</sup> In many Swiss firms, as indeed in the belligerent states, women were hired as replacements for men who had been called up, so they were only given temporary contracts, even in jobs that required professional qualifications.<sup>[11]</sup> Quite a few wives took over their soldiering husbands' jobs, becoming postwomen, for example, or working in municipal offices.<sup>[12]</sup> Temporary jobs also opened up for women in the production of military uniforms, gas masks and steel helmets; in catering and laundry for the troops; and in war relief for soldiers' families.<sup>[13]</sup> The wives of farmers and business owners bore a greatly increased workload while their husbands were away on border duty, and officially detailing soldiers to help with farm work only relived the burden to a limited extent. Because soldiers had few, if any, relevant duties during military service and the frequent military manoeuvres were often seen as pointless time-killing, some women who were suffering from work pressure and food shortages voiced their bitterness about the unequal distribution of labour and responsibilities.<sup>[14]</sup>

## The Family Economy and Family Networks

Communication between mobilised soldiers and their families was usually via laundry bags. When a soldier sent his dirty washing home to female relatives, he often included a letter or postcard about daily life as a soldier, about the food, their living quarters or what they did in their free time, but also about the hardships, the lack of money or the measly bread rations.

In contrast to army provisioning, which was guaranteed throughout the war, the material situation of families deteriorated, not just because of lost income, but also because of inflation, which was rampant particularly from 1916 onwards. There had been little to no economic planning for the event of war.<sup>[15]</sup> Between 1914 and 1918, the price index more than doubled, while real wages fell by around one quarter. The rate of inflation varied for different foodstuffs: the price of pork trebled, while

the price of eggs increased almost tenfold. At local levels, municipal authorities took steps as early as 1915, distributing subsidised foodstuffs, for example. But on the national level, the government did not intervene in the market for basic goods until later.<sup>[16]</sup> Even so, for most families, basic food supplies were uncertain.

Women from working-class backgrounds, but also from lower middle-class and white-collar circles were taking on all kinds of temporary work. In urban areas, they stepped up production in allotment gardens and re-activated extensive family networks to source fresh vegetables and exchange other farm produce for labour. By contrast, women in wealthy upper middle-class families were not greatly affected by the shortages. They knew how to take advantage of their female servants' and indeed their workers' dependence, using their connections to farm producers to arrange direct supplies of food. Many of these women also benefitted materially from the wartime economy, being related to men in business and financial circles. Their letters and diaries mostly convey an image of family life spared from any great hardship, clouded only by concern for relatives and friends in the countries affected by the war. There is a great deal of patriotic identification with the army, channelled primarily via male relatives serving as army officers; critical questions are rarely voiced. To some extent, the opportunities that the war created for women of the bourgeoisie to become involved in voluntary or relief work gave their lives more meaning. Many of them worked closely with men from their own social circles and were able to use their influence when dealing with the army and administrative authorities.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Women's Mobilisation

While the women workers' movement and the pacifists firmly rejected the close association in Swiss discourse between compulsory military service and civil rights, it still played a significant role in mobilising other sections of the women's movement. The government's appeal to women to remain "calm and collected" was interpreted by many women's groups as both a call to patriotic duty and an emancipatory opportunity.<sup>[18]</sup> Socially committed middle-class women pitched in, thinking that they would ultimately secure the vote in public recognition of their commitment. Social democrat women, on the other hand, rejected the idea of suffrage as a reward for duties performed and demanded the unconditional right to vote in the name of equal rights. They did not condemn the voluntary work done by women's organisations in general, but made increasingly explicit demands, in line with the workers' movement, for legislative measures to reduce the hardship caused by the war.

## Voluntary Work under the Aegis of Women's Associations

In order to take an active role as citizens, women's associations whose main goals were equality at work and equality before the law had no choice but to work with the charitable women's organisations, as these had the necessary experience and networks. Therefore, feminists, who were mainly based in the cities, pushed for formal cooperation between all women's organisations so that they could benefit from the existing structures for charitable work and, at the same time, establish

their claim to equal rights.<sup>[19]</sup> Cooperation between women's associations at local levels did in fact prove more effective than the local authorities in terms of distributing clothing and food, processing fruit and vegetables, and organising work that unemployed women or soldiers' wives could do at home. In some areas – for example, in cities like Zurich and St Gallen – women's groups joined forces to create new *Frauzentralen* (local unions of women's associations), in part to coordinate relief work more effectively. The main drivers of women's involvement in this relief work were those sections of the *Schweizerischer Gemeinnütziger Frauenverein* (umbrella body of women's associations for public benefit) that were close to the politically dominant Liberals and already had considerable experience in collecting money and providing practical relief. For example, they set up soup kitchens, had thousands of socks knitted for soldiers, and ran laundries for unmarried soldiers where hundreds of women volunteered alongside a small number of paid staff.<sup>[20]</sup> The *Nationale Frauenspende* (national women's contribution) was a counterpart to the *Dienstersatzsteuer* (military substitute tax) paid by men who were unable to serve on health grounds or for other reasons. It was launched in 1915 by Emma Graf (1865-1926) and women's rights activists from Bern with the slogan “*Pflichten erfüllen, heißt Rechte begründen*” (“To fulfil duties is to establish rights”). The *Schweizerischer Frauenstimmrechtsverband* (Swiss Association for Women's Suffrage) turned down an appeal to contribute through this donation to the costs of mobilisation, on the grounds that women should be given the right to vote regardless of whether they took on any other duties. But the proposed *Frauenspende* received widespread support within the *Schweizerischer Gemeinnütziger Frauenverein*, which saw it as a way to demonstrate patriotic commitment. It also allowed the umbrella organisation to further consolidate the position it had achieved in pre-war years as the preferred representative of Swiss women as far as the authorities were concerned.<sup>[21]</sup> The sum of one million Swiss francs, handed over to the government without any preconditions, was used first and foremost to finance the *Wehrmannsfürsorge* (Aid for Soldiers) under the aegis of the soldier's welfare association *Schweizer Verband Soldatenwohl*.<sup>[22]</sup>

### Professionalisation of Troop Catering and War Welfare

Within a very short time, the *Schweizer Verband Soldatenwohl*, which was closely linked with the temperance movement, set up canteens and relaxation areas for soldiers in almost every corner of Switzerland, making use of schoolrooms, workshops, and barracks. These *Soldatenstuben* (soldiers' rooms) multiplied rapidly under the leadership of journalist Else Spiller (1881-1948); Züblin-Spiller from 1920).<sup>[23]</sup> The *Soldatenstuben* changed location according to troop movements and were run by women with domestic science training who were paid for their work, so-called *Soldatenmütter* (soldiers' mothers). With this model, Spiller broke down the traditional demarcation between paid and unpaid work for women, creating the first paid positions for housewives in Switzerland, and that in the typically male domain of the army.<sup>[24]</sup> The association could not manage without unpaid work, however. At local level, charitable women's groups and “ladies' committees” helped out, too. This allowed the association to take on additional infrastructural tasks, such as mending and laundry for unmarried soldiers, along the lines of existing war laundries, and to extend the range of welfare

provisions. Financial and material costs were covered by donations and in-kind support on the one hand, by money from the *Nationale Frauenspende* on the other. The latter was also the chief source of funding for the *Wehrmannsfürsorge* (Aid for Soldiers) initiated by Spiller. By the end of the war, the *Schweizer Verband Soldatenwohl* had mustered around 1,000 women “from the upper echelons” to gather information at local and regional levels about families who might need support because they had lost income when their men were mobilised. In order to put the *Wehrmannsfürsorge* on secure financial footing, it was annexed to the Swiss Army in 1917, though it still remained an integral part of the *Soldatenwohl* association. Later, in autumn 1918, when Swiss soldiers were hit by the [Spanish Flu](#), Spiller took over from the army leadership and rapidly set up emergency [hospitals](#), again mainly in close cooperation with local women’s groups or *Frauzentralen*.

The success of the *Schweizer Verband Soldatenwohl* lay in its strategy of involving women from many and various backgrounds, and in having a mix of paid and unpaid work. The professionalisation of domestic and social work opened new professional opportunities, while the involvement of women in a voluntary capacity created the basis for a network that would grow over time and become politically significant. In addition, cooperation with local women’s groups allowed the *Soldatenwohl* association to capitalise on their fundraising experience and practical voluntary work.<sup>[25]</sup>

### **In the Belligerents’ Service: Nursing, Transports and Tracing Service**

As a result of the federal decree of 1903 regarding voluntary medical support for war-related purposes, any institutions that trained [nurses](#) and received a state subsidy to that end were obliged to provide nursing staff for the army in the event of war. During the First World War, almost 700 nurses from twelve training hospitals and schools of nursing served short terms in military service. Around 200 nurses from German-speaking Switzerland were sent to [Austria-Hungary](#) to nurse the wounded, where they worked under the aegis of the *Schwesternverein der Berufsorganisation der Krankenpflegerinnen Deutschlands* (Association of German Nurses). This mission was arranged by Swiss nurse [Emmy Oser \(1870-1929\)](#), who was honorary vice-president of the International Council of Nurses (ICN), and her German colleague [Agnes Karll \(1868-1927\)](#). Through various medical networks, twenty nurses from French-speaking Switzerland were assigned to Evian, and around three dozen worked with American Nobel Prize-winner Dr [Alexis Carrel \(1873-1944\)](#) in Compiègne in northern France. In the gender-specific thinking of the time, these assignments were understood to be “unpolitical women’s work” and of a humanitarian nature. None of the belligerents interpreted them as a breach of [Swiss neutrality](#).<sup>[26]</sup>

Nurses were also called upon to accompany the war wounded in *Sanitätszüge* (medical convoys). As the Swiss [Red Cross](#) was responsible for repatriating injured soldiers and civilians, women accounted for significant numbers of the thousands of volunteers who offered their services to people transiting Switzerland.<sup>[27]</sup> Women also served as volunteers where prisoners of war were being exchanged.<sup>[28]</sup>

## Socialist International Women and the Women Workers' Protest

Because of Switzerland's neutral status, the International Socialist Women's Conference convened in Bern in March 1915, at the instigation of Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) from Germany and Louise Saumoneau (1875-1950) from France. It was the first significant peace rally attended by delegates from the belligerent states.<sup>[29]</sup> They considered war to be a continuation of the class struggle and condemned the charitable work carried out by "bourgeois" women's groups as effectively supporting the war in the name of patriotism. Following the conference, demonstrations against hunger and inflation took place in major towns and cities in Switzerland, and indeed in other European centres. The protests were mainly organised by the women workers' movement. The so-called *Markunruhen* (market riots) of summer 1916, when women imposed unilateral price reductions on traders and toppled market stalls, stirred up much attention. Leaders such as Rosa Grimm-Reichesberg (1875-1955) in Bern and Rosa Bloch-Bollag (1880-1922) in Zurich scornfully distanced themselves from charitable women's groups who were suggesting that people should use food supplies sparingly. In summer 1918, up to 15,000 women and men took part in mass demonstrations in Basel and Zurich. In Zurich, Bloch-Bollag fought for the right for herself and two other women workers' representatives to bring their demands before the cantonal parliament; they were the only women allowed to speak directly to the cantonal parliament prior to the introduction of female suffrage in the canton of Zurich in 1970.

## Interventions by Pacifist Women Following Hague Conference

Across all ideological barriers, pacifist women associated with the worker's movement cultivated a working relationship with women's rights activists, even when the latter did not always share the former's uncompromising pacifism. Clara Ragaz (1874-1957), founder and for many years president of the Swiss section of the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (ICWPP) established at the International Congress of Women in The Hague in 1915, was in close contact with Jane Addams (1860-1935), the well-known American sociologist and pioneer of social work. Ragaz was involved in organising the second congress in Zurich in 1919, at which delegates voted to set up international headquarters in Geneva and rename the organisation the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).<sup>[30]</sup> While some of the pacifist women in Switzerland were close to the Dadaists, most of them held similar views to Ragaz, who was closely linked to the socio-religious movement. This line of thought considered female suffrage indispensable so that women, being the biologically gentler sex, could fully engage in the battle against war and social injustice.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Conclusion: Long-lasting Entrenchment of Gender Roles

After the war ended, women were hardest hit by the economic downturn. According to official statistics, unemployment rose to around 100,000, or 5 percent, by 1922. However, these figures omitted most of the women who lost their war-time jobs, because they were mainly classed as

working in the home rather than unemployed.<sup>[32]</sup> All the women who had been hoping for an improvement in their legal status after the war lost out, too. While they were commended for making sacrifices and shouldering extra responsibilities during the war, this was couched as praise for selflessly carrying out their duty, which implicitly legitimised deferral of equal legal status for women. Susan R. Grayzel's and Brigitta Bader-Zaar's conclusion that the suffragettes' position was not strengthened by patriotic loyalty can also be applied to Switzerland. Françoise Thébaud's theory would also seem to be borne out, namely that the First World War had no substantive emancipatory effect; rather, it served to cement traditional gender roles.<sup>[33]</sup> Regula Stämpfli comes to the same conclusion, with specific reference to the Swiss context: The "unconditional, social and cultural priority given to border protection, and hence to soldiers, confirmed the political predominance of men."<sup>[34]</sup> This misogynistic equation of civil rights with compulsory military service became very obvious in the massive rejection of female suffrage in all referendums, both cantonal and municipal, in the post-war years. It was not until 1971 that Swiss women were enfranchised on the federal level. This was consolidated in a Constitutional amendment in 1981 that explicitly gives equal rights to men and women.<sup>[35]</sup>

The post-war legacy of consumer cooperatives like the *Association des Productrices de Moudon*, and the views they represented, was different. They led to new, cross-party communication networks linking urban and rural communities. The fact that it was now taken for granted that women would be involved in implementing government measures created an opening that bore fruit in the run-up to the Second World War. The canteens set up by Else Spiller were a prime example of this: the tried and tested wartime soldiers' canteens (*Soldatenstuben*) became the model for factory canteens, which were a run-away success by the 1920s.<sup>[36]</sup> Job opportunities for women also opened up; indeed, women's associations increased their efforts to improve women's career options after the disappointing suffrage referendums. However, this did little to change the hierarchical concepts of masculinity and femininity that had become even more rigid during the war.<sup>[37]</sup> On the contrary, advocates of pro-natalist policies in the 1930s cited the patriotic role of mothers during the war and used this to try and limit women's career opportunities. The prioritisation of so-called "women's professions", along with an emphasis on the roles of housewife and mother as the true expression of femininity, dominated even among the women's associations that organised the second *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit* (SAFFA; Swiss Exhibition for Women's Work) in 1958. That same year saw the publication of *Frauen im Laufgitter* (Women in the Playpen) by Iris von Roten (1917–1990), a powerful critique of discrimination against women.<sup>[38]</sup>

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