

*Womans Rights*

# How Women Can Best Serve the State

AN ADDRESS

BEFORE THE

STATE FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS

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BY

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## HOW WOMEN CAN BEST SERVE THE STATE

MRS. PRESIDENT AND LADIES:

The Twentieth Century opens with government by party, the almost universal rule in all civilized countries, Russia alone excepted. Even the Kaiser, reigning by right Divine, does not venture on pushing any very important measure unless he is sure of the preponderance of the Reichstag. Naturally, in a Republic, the strength of party government has "grown with our growth and strengthened with our strength." Our parties have grown from the smallest of beginnings to the most formidable of organizations. No longer does the voter on election day cast his vote for an elector who, exercising his own best judgment, shall choose a President for him, but for an elector who casts his vote for the man whom the party he represents has already chosen. Theoretically, nothing could be better than party government, especially where the parties are pretty equally divided. The "Ins" are to be kept in the path of virtue by the "Outs," who in their turn will endeavor to so shape their policies as to insure for themselves recognition and return to power from the people. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, this theory has not worked out in practice, and many a party politician will welcome a national misfortune, provided it bring obloquy to the other side. Nor is this a new development. Macaulay, in his lay of Horatius, makes the appeal for the old days (old even in those days of fable), "When none were for a party and all were for the State." It is evident, therefore, that we must accept partisanship, political trickery and office-seeking as necessary evils inseparable from modern conditions, and the question arises what can be done to palliate the situation. To our minds, the solution has been found by the entrance of women into public life. Standing in an absolutely independent position, freed from all party affiliations, untrammelled by any political obligations, the intelligent, self-sacrificing women of to-day are serving the State (though many of them hardly realize it) as a third party whose disinterestedness none can doubt.

To do men justice, they have welcomed the new element. Governors have gladly appointed women to positions on Boards of Education, of Charities and Corrections, and on Sanitary Commissions. "It is such a relief," said one Governor lately, "to be able to pick out the best worker in that particular line and know that one is neither giving offense nor raising false hopes by doing so."

The advantage of complete political independence enjoyed by women so appointed, can not possibly be over-estimated. Only those who have been so placed (and doubtless there are many such in this audience) can begin to realize what it means to be able to plead for a cause or a reform in administration, and to know that such a plea will be considered on its merits alone, with no ulterior thought of what may be the motive of the pleader or what "pull" may lie back of the petition. This attitude of entire disinterestedness is, above all things, useful when appropriations have to be obtained from legislatures. Some years ago, an appropriation for absolutely necessary improvements to one of the asylums for the criminal insane was "held up," session after session. The parties were very evenly divided, and each wanted to trade appropriations with the other. The deadlock was at last broken by two women, who appeared before the committee, and in a simple but convincing manner explained the unnecessary sufferings of the poor creatures who could not make their wrongs known. The bill was reported favorably and went through at once. The chairman of the committee thus explained the matter: "When those women told us just how things were and what was really needed, we knew they were telling us the truth, for they had nothing to gain, one way or another." "When I look at my poor lunatics in their nice clean cells," one of these two women wrote, some time later, "I am so thankful to be a woman; to be able to *work* for the *work* and not to be suspected of wanting any political advantage out of it." Unquestionably, had the poor lunatics been capable of understanding the situation, they would have been thankful likewise. More than one probationary officer in New York City has expressed gratitude that she could not be said to belong to Tammany, nor the County Democracy, nor yet the Republicans, and when aid was needed for her protégés, could approach all organizations indifferently, relying only on the genuineness of her case.

Organization being the order of the day, the majority of women do their share of public service through an organization, rather than by individual effort. In organization, the same principle of power through independence holds good. A "Good Government" club or a "Civic Betterment" club, composed of women, exercises its influence for good because it expresses in its highest terms the best public opinion—that is, public opinion divorced from political or party questions. It is for this reason that such clubs command respect and secure respectful hearings. When, for instance, the



Woman's Municipal League of New York City, goes to Mayor McClellan, and says: "Never in our memory have the streets been so dirty," the Mayor can not reply: "Well, you are a Tammany organization; why don't you see your friend Murphy?" Nor can he allege: "As Republicans, it is evident you are determined to find fault with everything a Democratic administration may do." On the contrary, he is obliged to take it as a disinterested protest and act accordingly, and *that*, I am happy to say, was just what he *did* do! This co-operation of organized women in public life is still so new that it is no wonder that the pioneers make some mistakes. The only matter of surprise is that they do not make more. Fortunately, the conservative women connected with such movements realize that what is at stake is not so much present measures as the whole status of women as public servants. Feeling this, they advocate a caution which frequently irritates their more strenuous sisters. For example, recently (so very recently that the city shall be nameless) a Good Government club, after much agitation, secured the appointment of four police matrons, such appointments being made after the usual municipal-politics manner. Ere long, complaints come in; and a few weeks ago a committee from the club found itself waiting on the police commissioner and relating its grievances. One matron, it was alleged, was rarely sober; another had been known to purloin trifles from helpless prisoners. The third had a violent and ungoverned temper, while the fourth was just plain incompetent. The police commissioner listened quietly, and then said: "I have no doubt, ladies, that what you tell me is exactly so, but you see these women are all appointed by 'Big Dick Smith,' and we can't offend him; but," he added, brightening up, "if you will press the matter, agitate it in the newspapers, I will discharge the women on account of pressure from your organization. I will even go farther—I will appoint any four women your club suggests." Delighted, the committee hurried back to the board of directors to report, and found themselves confronted with this situation: The club would certainly agitate, and do all it could to bring about the discharge of undesirable city employes, but recommend others it could not, one of its cardinal policies being, "Measures, not men." Some of the most active and enthusiastic workers deeply lamented this attitude, which they felt deprived the club of an opportunity to do an excellent and greatly needed piece of work. That it was a wise stand, however, who can doubt, who realizes that only in that way can absolute independence be maintained.

My understanding of the subject allotted to me to-day is, women in public life as distinguished from women in charitable life or mission enterprise. Yet, in these days of interdependent work and effort, it is very difficult to draw the line where the one begins and the other ends. How, for instance, shall we classify the "Consumers' League"? It began in the philanthropic desire of a few women to safeguard and alleviate the lot of that singularly helpless body of workers—young shop girls. At first, it hardly went beyond inducing employers to provide seats for the girls when they were not actively engaged in their work, seeing that they had proper sanitary conveniences and an adequate luncheon hour. Now the work has grown until it has become a state question, involving factory inspection and including much legislation affecting the working hours and conditions for women and children. Another example of the way in which sociological work transforms itself into practical problems is to be found in the legislation arising out of the investigations of the household research department of the Woman's Municipal League in New York City. The director of the department, Miss Frances A. Kellor, under a fellowship from the University of Chicago, began ten years ago a study of women detained in prisons and reformatories. In prosecuting this work, she often stayed for weeks and months in the prisons as a guest of the wardens, and was thus enabled to make friends with the inmates and secure their confidence. When she came to collate and arrange the notes thus taken, she was herself surprised to find how many women dated their downfall from the abominable conditions prevailing at the employment agencies where they had gone for work. These facts Miss Kellor placed before some active workers, and the consequence was that, with her co-operation, an association was formed (the treasurer of which I have the honor to be), with branches in Boston, Philadelphia and New York, the object being to improve the conditions under which an unemployed and untrained woman must seek work, and at the same time to try to attract these young women from the over-crowded, poorly-paid trades into the well-paid, under-manned line of domestic service. I am sure it would interest you all, could I take the time to tell you how we first secured an employment-agency law for the State of New York, and how then, finding that the discredited agents simply moved across the ferry, we applied to the energetic women of New Jersey, and how they, with our aid, secured the passage of an excellent agency bill through the last legislature. Meanwhile, the Philadelphia ladies had drawn Pennsylvania into line. It is much easier to get a law



passed than to get it enforced, and we felt that, as an organization, we had our hands full in investigating complaints and keeping the commissioner of licenses up to his work; but we have not been allowed to pause in our labors. Our work with the employment agencies has brought us in touch with the immigrant girl and woman, and we had forced upon our attention the terrible dangers which surround her. It was owing to investigations undertaken by us that Congress last year passed the bill rendering liable to deportation any girl found in a disorderly house within two years after landing. Another phase of the immigration question which was forced upon our attention was the shameful way in which the foreigners were treated (usually by their own countrymen) in the matter of remitting money to their home people. In New York City there existed very many fake banks. The so-called banker, usually an Italian or a Hebrew, had no capital beyond a few foreign coins, which he placed in a bowl in his window, yet he undertook to forward money entrusted to him to any part of the world. Needless to say, it never reached its destination, and when the hapless victim returned to complain, he either found the "banker" flown or was met with ridicule or threats. One poor man, for example, was told he had better not make a fuss about the matter, as it was against the law to send money out of the country, and if he complained to the police he would be himself arrested. The victims were indeed quite helpless. The district attorney's office, which has always most loyally and willingly stood by us, could do nothing, as the evidence that the money was *not* received was in Europe. These precious scamps added to their nefarious gains by posing as steamship ticket sellers, their qualifications consisting of a poster of some steamship line, though in one case, a colored lithograph of a battleship was forced to do duty. Of course, they could not sell tickets, but they sold what they called orders for tickets, which, upon being presented on the other side, were, naturally, useless. I would not harrow your feelings, even if I had the time to spare, by narrating some of the stories that have come to us, for pitiful they were beyond words to describe. The steamship companies were only too anxious to break up the ticket business, but found themselves in the position of interested parties before the Legislature, so once again we profited by our inestimable privilege of freedom from all trammels, and our bills were passed by the last Legislature. One of these bills, No. 515,845, is an amendment to the banking bill, and provides that all "firms or corporations" taking deposits to be sent abroad, and selling steamship tickets, must file a bond for \$15,000.

The other bill, No. 1553, is an amendment to the penal code to prevent fraud in the sale of transportation tickets. Both these laws came into effect on September 1st of this year, and we are now engaged in looking after their proper enforcement.

I have dwelt at length on the work of the research department, not because I think it an exceptional board—I have no doubt that equally good work is being done in every city in the state—but because the work accomplished seems to me a good illustration of the great advantage possessed by women in their present political status. I find among my more radical friends an objection to our method of work, which for some unknown reason, they term indirect. "Yes," they say, "you have done a great deal, and you have got all you want from Congress and the Legislature, but these indirect ways are so undignified—how much better to have direct influence." My answer to that is: If we are *anything*, we are direct; if we stand for anything in public life, it is for direct methods and straightforward action—it is the men who need the lobby, not we. It is the men who, because they belong to this party, must placate some men on the other side, not we. It is the men who go to their party leader and through him get at the committee they wish to influence, not we. We go straight to the governor, attorney-general, or chairman of the committee, as circumstances require. We have no favors to give and none to ask. We make a plain statement of our case, backed up by as carefully-arranged evidence as we know how to prepare. We answer the questions asked us and take our leave. If there is anything indirect in this procedure it lies beyond my powers of discernment.

As I pause in my writing at this point, it occurs to me in what a different spirit I have put what I had to say than would have been the case twenty-five years ago. Then, I should have thought it necessary to begin my paper with an elaborate defense of the propriety of woman appearing in public life at all. I should have felt it imperative to express a belief that it would not unfit them for their domestic duties. Now, I have taken it as a matter of course that we all agree that bridge, lectures, theatres, or even prayer-meetings, are more likely to distract a woman from her home pursuits than the arduous path of public service. For public work is hard work. Those who follow it must be content to receive "more kicks than ha'-pence." It is a self-effacing work. We women who are in it are too busy with our work to talk about it. We have among us women who are capable of drawing up a brief for the attorney-general, or an abstract of evidence for the governor,



but we have very few speakers and no agitators. Only women who love the work for its own sake will ever be tempted into our ranks. Yes, the position of woman has changed much in the last quarter of a century. She has now every legal right necessary for her protection, and, crowning mercy, she has acquired them without being called upon to lay down her independence! I often think of a meeting I once attended in California, where some of our strenuous sisters were demanding what they chose to call "rights." At the close I was asked to make a few remarks. In reply, I gave a brief digest of the laws of California concerning women. There was a dead pause after I had finished speaking, which was suddenly broken by a shrewd old woman from Southern Missouri, who drawled out with the true "bush-whacker" intonation: "Wal, gals, I reckon your quarrel is with the Lord and not with the law."

And now in closing, I want to say a few words to young women, especially—to those young women who are to-day coming forward to take up the task that we older workers must ere long lay down. Do not be beguiled by any specious arguments about the so-called equality of women into forgetting your true position. Do not let yourself be imposed upon by change, masquerading as progress. Above all, I beseech you, let no hope of personal gain, no restless ambition to play a part in factional public life, induce you to surrender the all-powerful, absolutely unique position we pioneers have secured for you. Let your watchword be "Power through Independence"—that is our last word to you from the conservative women represented by our organization.

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