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Women in Switzerland: May 1988 – May 1989

A close scrutiny of a year ...

The recognition of women as members of society with equal rights and status is a long-drawn-out process. Deeply rooted patterns of behaviour, prejudices and social standards do not help to make it simpler. This "tour d'horizon" – far from complete of course, yet not untypical – of some events occurring in the period May '88 to May '89 aims at providing a glimpse of the "condition féminine" in Switzerland.

In May '88, in Kreuzlingen (TG), an insurance inspector had just pulled off a very profitable deal. This triumph had to be celebrated with a few drinks with his staff. The inspector was soon in high spirits and was inspired to hug and kiss a young woman and to importune another woman by putting his hand under her skirt.

That is not a scene in which a man who is crazed with love can afford to have two girlfriends. No, it is a quite normal occurrence at an office. Of the two women concerned, one was a young apprentice, the other the inspector's secretary. As the secretary tried to repulse the sexual harassment by her intoxicated boss, she injured her left elbow on the edge of her desk, which resulted in her having to undergo an operation. She sued her boss on grounds of sexual pestering. He was found guilty, given a *suspended* sentence of three weeks in prison and fined.

A widespread offence

That a manager is punished by the law-courts on account of sexual harassment in

the place of work is something new for Switzerland. For years, many other countries have been dealing with this type of offence, but here it is only recently that the various problems involved have been taken seriously. No official statistics exist, but there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Swiss women are molested in this manner. Surveys in the Federal Republic of Germany for instance have shown that some 25% of working women reported similar experiences – and studies in Great Britain indicated that the percentage there is even higher, around 50%.

Women have less leverage

It is almost always the case that complaints against the employer or immediate superior lead to very serious difficulties for the female worker in the workplace, or even to dismissal. That is the main reason why since the introduction of equal rights for women in the Federal Constitution in 1981 – including the right to "equal pay for equal work" – very few female workers have formally

claimed equal remuneration. Who cares about the constitution – in reality hardly anything has changed! Women who work in Switzerland still earn about 30% less than men. Even if one takes into account the fact that women have usually had an inferior education and training than men, the difference after adjustment for this factor still varies between 7% and 16%.

Thus in April 1989, the Swiss Trades Union Federation (the "SGB") wrote to the Federal Department of Justice and Police demanding that "urgent steps should be taken for implementation of wage equality for women". The unions have also demanded – so far without success – that there should be protection against dismissal for any female worker who has formally complained on this score.

Lawsuits concerning wage equality

In spite of the adverse factors mentioned above, various legal actions were brought before the courts last year. In Schaffhausen for instance, six teachers of needlework and



The walk to the "Landsgemeinde" – in future with the women!



The historical "Landsgemeinde" of April 30, 1989, at Hundwil in Appenzell Outer-Rhoden: women were at long last granted equal rights to attend. (Photos: Willy Spiller)



domestic science went to court to demand the same pay as their male colleagues who were working as teachers in primary schools. The High Court pronounced judgment in favour of the female teachers. In April of this year, some needlework teachers in Berne followed suit. Two women teachers refused to understand why *they* should earn 30% less than their male colleagues. No definitive judgment has as yet been pronounced.

Bureaux for Equal Status

“On paper women have equal rights – but in practice there are serious snags” says Claudia Kaufmann, head of the Federal Bureau for Equal Status for Women. Outsiders may well wonder, what on earth is such a bureau for? Mrs. Kaufmann, often called “Madame Egalité”, says: “Our function is to ensure that the rights that we have on paper can be implemented in practice”. The Swiss Federal Bureau for Equal Status was opened in January 1989. Examples of its functions include the drafting of plans for the advancement of women, and the formulating of recommendations to businesses and public authorities. The Bureau will also inform regularly about blatant cases of discrimination against women.

The Cantonal governments are also beginning to set up their own bureaux for ensuring women’s equal status. By the spring of 1989, four such Cantonal bureaux were functioning (for the Jura, Geneva, St. Gall and Basle-Country cantons). Preparations are well under way for the setting up of bureaux in the Cantons of Berne, Lucerne, Basle-City, Zurich, Ticino, Aargau, Solothurn, Vaud and Zug.

Women and the “Landsgemeinde”

The theme of “Female Suffrage in Appenzell” is not one of the most edifying chapters in the history of our democracy, but it has made the headlines of late. Appenzell comprises two half-cantons, Appenzell-Outer-Rhoden and Appenzell-Inner-Rhoden respectively. Appenzell-Outer-Rhoden recently decided – as the last-but-one half-canton in Switzerland and probably the penultimate body politic in the whole wide world! – to grant women the right to vote on cantonal issues. (They had for years already been entitled to vote on matters concerning Switzerland as a whole.) The Government of the half-canton had recommended such a decision back in the summer of 1988, but after four rejections of this recommendation, the all-male Landsgemeinde of April ’89, in Hundwil, finally gave its consent. This left the other half-canton as the very



On their own for the very last time: the men of Outer-Rhoden at their all-male “Landsgemeinde” – with weapons as their credentials! (Photo: Willy Spiller)

last male bastion. One of its female citizens lost her patience in May 1989 and lodged a formal complaint under constitutional law, so that the Federal Court will now have to decide whether the ban on women’s right to vote in Appenzell-Inner-Rhoden is not in fact unconstitutional!

Women have a firm grasp on Zurich!

One consoling development is the fact that since the spring of 1989, women are in control of the Canton of Zurich! The annually elected President of the Govern-

ment has since April been Hedi Lang, who heads the Zurich Department of Justice – this was a “première” for Switzerland, being the first time ever a woman had been chosen as President of a Cantonal government. And as if that were not enough, on May 8 of this year, the Zurich Cantonal Council (the Legislative) re-elected a woman as President, Ursula Leemann, so that at present a two-woman team is occupying the two highest political posts in the Canton of Zurich.

Elisabeth Hörler

The situation of women in Switzerland

Equality in practice

In everyday life, Swiss women are still a long way away from the equality of rights that they should have, even if some progress has been made at the levels of our constitution and legislation. Four Swiss women who for years have been observing the status of women from different standpoints, and have taken an active part in the securing of equal rights, now express their views on recent changes that have been taking place.

Than-Huyen Ballmer-Cao (38) holds a doctor’s degree in political science and is habilitated at the University of Zurich, where she is engaged on research projects. She comes originally from Vietnam, is married, has three children. Dr. Ballmer-Cao has effected several investigations and publications into the political situation of women in Switzerland, and their political attitudes. When she arrived in Switzerland in

1969, the introduction of female suffrage was soon to take place. “I had the privilege of observing this historical happening from a ‘ringside seat’. I wondered of course why in such an enlightened country as Switzerland this elementary right for women did not exist”, says Dr. Ballmer-Cao. She therefore made a detailed analysis of the then current Parliamentary debates and found something quite astounding: “Even the