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Swiss women celebrate 40 years of suffrage

Swiss women have come a long way since 1971, the year they were granted the right to vote at the federal level. On February 7, 1971, 66 per cent of Swiss men voted in favour of allowing women to vote. The first opportunity came on June 6 of that year – when nationwide issues included environmental protection and financial regulations. Elisabeth Kopp, Switzerland's first female cabinet member, remembers the not-so-good old days quite well: "When I talk with young people and my grandchildren, they are so amazed when they hear that I could not open a bank account in my own name as mayor of the city where we live. They look at me and say this cannot be true, but unfortunately it was."

While she described the election of the female cabinet majority in September 2010 as a great moment in Swiss history, she also noted that it was more of a symbolic one. Like so many of her colleagues, Kopp feels there is a lot of work to be done on the gender equality front. As a priority she cited equal pay for equal work.

Asked what people could expect in 40 years from now, Kopp said: "I hope men will be more emancipated by then and support the equality of women at their side – not only in politics but also in the whole society and in the family – and realise what an advantage this means. It's a challenge of course, being married to a woman who has equal rights and a

good education and so on, but it's much more interesting."

Switzerland was almost the last country in Europe to give women the vote, in 1971. The fight for women's suffrage in Switzerland goes back to the end of the 19th century. The Swiss Female Workers' Association called for the vote for women in 1893.

In 1904 the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland included women's suffrage in its manifesto. In 1912 and 1919 a number of cantons rejected moves to give women the vote at cantonal level. A petition calling for women to get the vote at federal level collected nearly 250,000 signatures, but was ignored.

The first breakthrough came in 1957, when canton Basel City voted to allow communes to give women the vote at commune level. Riehen was the first to do so, in 1958.

In a federal vote in 1959, women's suffrage was rejected by 67%.

Women were finally granted the right to vote at federal level on February 7, 1971. In October 1971 the first 11 women were elected to parliament. Women still did not have the vote at the local level in all cantons and communes. The last to hold out was canton Appenzell Inner-Rhodes. Women got the vote there in 1990, after a Federal Court decision.

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Wie glücklich ist der Pessimist

*Wie glücklich ist der Pessimist,
wenn etwas schiefgegangen ist!
Und geht es aller Welt auch schlecht,
Ihm bleibt der Trost: Er hatte recht!
Ein Träger düsterer Unheilsbrillen,
Glaubt er nicht mal an "freien Willen".*

*Doch gläubig sind die Optimisten,
Ob sie nun Moslems, Juden, Christen.
Und kommen sie einst alle heil
In Gottes Himmelreich,
Dann sagt der Optimist: "Weil..",
Der Pessimist: "Obgleich!"*

Mascha Kaleko