

Chapter One

Navigating the Path to Gender Equality: A Global Perspective on Women's Rights and the Slovenian Women's Movements

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The present text explores the complex and multifaceted history of women's rights globally, spanning various epochs and geographical regions. From ancient civilisations where women occupied subordinate roles to contemporary movements demanding equality, the journey towards gender parity has been marked by significant milestones and challenges. Advocacy for women's rights has been a consistent theme, with ongoing struggles to secure women's inclusion in political, economic, and social spheres. Despite substantial progress, persistent barriers rooted in patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and institutional biases continue to hinder full gender equality. The women's movement in Slovenia exemplifies this broader narrative, reflecting local contexts within the framework of European feminist discourses. Through activism and solidarity, this movement has shaped Slovenia's social trajectory, contributing to ongoing efforts to address gender disparities and advance women's rights within evolving political landscapes.

Keywords: women's rights, women's political movements, political participation, gender equality, Slovenia, global movements

Introduction

Throughout history, women have consistently faced inequality linked to their gender. The global history of women's rights is a complex narrative spanning epochs and geographical regions, marked by milestones, challenges, and transformative movements. From ancient civilisations where patriarchal structures dominated to modern-day struggles for gender equality, women have continuously fought for recognition and inclusion in political, economic, and social spheres.

In ancient civilisations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, patriarchal norms relegated women to subordinate roles. Legal sys-

tems, religious doctrines, and cultural practices reinforced gender hierarchies, limiting women's agency and participation in public life. Despite these constraints, glimpses of women's agency emerged through figures like Sappho and Cleopatra, who challenged societal norms through literary and political endeavours.

The medieval and early modern periods saw further entrenchment of patriarchal norms, heavily influenced by religious doctrines such as Christianity in Europe. Women were predominantly confined to domestic roles, and their relationships with men defined their moral worth. Despite these restrictions, women like Christine de Pizan and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz pushed against societal expectations through intellectual pursuits and advocacy for women's education and equality.

The Enlightenment era of the 18th and 19th centuries brought intellectual ferment and social transformation, laying the groundwork for modern feminist thought. Thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges advocated for women's rights and challenged prevailing notions of gender inequality. The Industrial Revolution drew women into emerging economies while reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and unequal access to economic opportunities.

In the 20th century, global feminist movements advocated for suffrage, legal reforms, and broader societal changes. The first wave of feminism secured voting rights in many Western democracies. In contrast, the second wave expanded the agenda to include reproductive rights, workplace equality, and awareness of gender-based violence. Legislative reforms and international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), underscored the global effort towards gender equality.

Contemporary challenges persist despite legislative gains and international frameworks. Cultural norms, stereotypes, and institutional practices continue to hinder progress towards gender parity. Women face disparities in economic opportunities, political representation, and access to education and healthcare. Gender-based violence remains pervasive, demanding comprehensive legal protections and support systems.

Global feminist solidarity has been pivotal in advancing gender equality agendas. Intersectional approaches recognise the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, sexuality, and disability, advocating for inclusive policies and social justice. Educational reforms,

cultural interventions, and media advocacy play crucial roles in challenging stereotypes and fostering gender-sensitive societies.

Collective action is imperative to address entrenched barriers and achieve substantive gender equality. Governments, civil society, and international organisations must prioritise intersectional approaches that dismantle systemic discrimination and promote inclusive policies. By learning from historical struggles, societies can forge pathways towards a future where gender equality is a reality for all individuals.

The history of women's rights globally reflects an ongoing struggle for equality, justice, and social change. Women's resilience and solidarity across diverse communities have been instrumental in advancing legal reforms and raising awareness of gender issues. However, achieving gender equality requires a sustained commitment to dismantling barriers and creating inclusive societies where everyone can thrive without gender-based constraints.

Women's Rights throughout the History

However, this march towards equality has been far from linear, often encountering formidable obstacles rooted in patriarchal structures and cultural norms.

The Code of Hammurabi in Babylon (2000 BC) is the first written code by the Babylonian king Hammurabi (the 6th king of the Babylonian dynasty, reigning between 1792 and 1750 BC). It states that the king's task is: 'to enable justice to rule the kingdom, to destroy the wicked and violent, to prevent the powerful from exploiting the weak... to enlighten the state and promote the welfare of the people.' (Council of Europe, 2012). Hammurabi primarily aimed to introduce reform in the social sphere, asserting that all people are equal before the law, whether they are farmers, artisans, or day labourers. Of course, the code distinguished three social strata: freemen, the court circle, and enslaved people. The Code recognised certain rights for women, such as entitlement to a share of their father's inheritance and receiving a dowry upon marriage (Beauvoir, 2013).

In ancient Egypt, around 2000 BC, the pharaoh was quoted when giving instructions to his subordinates: 'When a petitioner arrives from Upper or Lower Egypt [...] ensure that the law does everything, that the customs and rights of every person are respected.' During this period, women held the most favourable position in Egypt, as they had the same rights as men and the same legal power, allowing them to in-

herit and own property. However, since most property was owned by the rulers, the clergy, and the army, there was limited private property available for women to maintain the dignity of an independent person.

Ancient civilisations such as Greece and Rome began to witness women's voices challenging societal norms and laying the groundwork for future advocacy. Women were largely excluded from public life, although some, such as the Hetaeras and the Vestal Virgins, achieved a degree of influence and independence.

Hetaeras (Beauvoir, 2013; Dillon, 2003; Kurke, 1991) were educated attendants in ancient Greece, especially in Athens. Their role differed from that of other women in Greek society, as they were known for their education, wit, and cultural achievements. Hetaeras were often involved in intellectual and artistic circles and had influential relationships with prominent men. They were more than prostitutes; many were valued for their conversational and artistic skills. The Vestal Virgins (Staples, 1997) were priestesses in ancient Rome who served the goddess Vesta, goddess of the hearth and home. Their primary duty was to maintain the eternal fire in the sanctuary of Vesta, symbolising Rome's permanence. Vestal virgins were chosen as children from noble families and had to remain virgins and serve for 30 years. Their celibacy and service were vital to the safety and prosperity of Rome. Vestal women, highly valued in Roman society, also had special privileges, such as property rights and protection from corporal punishment. Early examples of advocacy for women's rights were limited. However, individual women, such as Aspasia of Miletus, a courtesan, a Hetaera, a teacher of Socrates, and a political adviser to her lover Pericles, transcended traditional roles in classical Greece and participated in philosophical and political debates. Figures such as Sappho (Powell, 2019) opposed patriarchy and advocated for women's social empowerment. Christine de Pizan's best-known works include *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which addressed questions about the role and value of women in society, defended women's intellectual and moral capacities, and challenged negative stereotypes about women at the time. *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, a continuation of the first book, focuses on women who have achieved greatness in history. In her writing, De Pizan presented women as capable and worthy of equal social recognition, which was revolutionary in her time (Brown-Grant, 2003).

In the Middle Ages, women's rights and role in social and political engagement were usually limited. Nevertheless, the differences depended

on time, place, and social status. Women from higher social classes or those in the church hierarchy had more influence and power. Most women in the Middle Ages were confined to traditional female roles such as looking after the household, raising children, and caring for the family. Few women were involved in public life or political activities. In political terms, women were rarely included in decision-making processes or appointed to high political positions, as political institutions were strongly male-oriented, excluding women from political power. The exception was mainly nuns, who had some power and influence within church institutions. Nuns could lead monasteries, be educators, and play an essential role in religious life. However, there was also a female social elite, where some women from the upper social classes could have some influence and power in social and political affairs. Their influence was often based on their social status, wealth, and connections to political or church leaders.

During the Renaissance period, several strong women played essential roles in shaping the political events of their time. Eleanor of Aquitaine, Matilda of Tuscany, Isabella I of Castile, and Catherine de' Medici were among the most influential women.

Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess of Aquitaine, Countess of Poitiers, and later Queen of France and then Queen of England played a crucial role in politics and social life. Matilda, Countess of Tuscany, was the daughter of King Henry I of England and became Empress of the Holy Roman Empire after her first marriage to Henry V. After her husband's death, she returned to England, where she launched a war for the throne against her cousin Stephen to assert her rights as heir to Henry I, an event known as the Anarchy. Her role in this war was crucial for subsequent political events in England. Isabella I of Castile was the queen of Castile and León, who, together with her husband Ferdinand II of Aragon, united the Spanish kingdoms and significantly influenced political events in Spain and Europe. Catherine de' Medici, wife of the French king Henry II and later the mother of three French kings, held an influential political position as Queen Mother. She played a vital role during the Wars of Religion in France in the 16th century.

In the 18th century, two important socio-political and intellectual phenomena appeared in Europe and America, accelerating the growth and spread of feminist ideologies: the Enlightenment and the revolution in America and France. The Age of Enlightenment was a period of progress in the fight for women's rights. Women in different parts of

the world defined and studied the unequal status of women. By writing and discussing, they highlighted their unequal position and began to express their opposition to the subordinate position of women, who desired greater rights and equality with men. The Enlightenment, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, criticised entrenched social hierarchies based on the inherited privileges of monarchs, nobility, and church institutions. They stood for the fundamental principles of freedom and equality in the Declaration of Man and the Citizen from 1789, although women were often excluded from these rights. Despite this exclusion, women actively participated in the revolutions that secured American independence from Britain in 1783 and sparked the French Revolution in 1789. Against the backdrop of calls for freedom and civil rights, women began articulating their demands for equality. Above all, Abigail Adams, the wife of the second president of the United States, persuaded the designers of American democracy to consider including women's interests in revolutionary changes. Similarly, in France, the playwright and activist Olympe de Gouges wrote *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen*, where she highlighted the shortcomings of the French Revolution in terms of gender equality and demanded equal rights for women. On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, laid the foundation for modern feminist thought by advocating for women's education and equality.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were watershed periods for women worldwide as they began lobbying their governments for suffrage. Among the pioneers of these movements were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Emmeline Pankhurst, whose steadfast defence of women's rights paved the way for many legislative changes. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an American suffragette, was one of the leading figures in the fight for women's suffrage. As a co-founder of the Women's Loyal National League, she was active in gender equality and was instrumental in creating arguments for women's right to vote. The passage of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920 was an important legislative act that guaranteed women the constitutional right to vote.

In Europe, reforms were also implemented in voting rights, enabling women to participate actively in the political process. Emmeline Pankhurst, a British suffragette and founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), drew attention to the fight for women's suffrage with her militant tactics and helped to pass legislative changes in

Great Britain. Many movements were characterised by activism, triggering a wave of changes across many countries. These movements highlighted the importance of equal participation of women in the political process and strengthened their influence on social and political events.

In the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, women worldwide began lobbying their governments for voting rights. Their methods and arguments varied. Women's suffrage organisations were often associated with pressure groups advocating for other agendas, such as racial equality or self-determination. In 1983, New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant voting rights to women, including Maori women.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, with the rise of the second wave of more radical feminism, the discourse on women's rights expanded to include issues such as reproductive autonomy, equality in the workplace, and violence against women. The distinction between biological sex and social gender as a social construct, first expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, strongly influenced second-wave feminist thinking. Feminists developed ideas about how culture and society could be changed to liberate women. As new ideas took shape, feminist political activism and campaigns intensified. A key concept of second-wave feminism was that women are not born but created - a product of social conditioning. In this context, second-wave feminism shed light on the more profound social and economic inequalities women faced and promoted comprehensive reforms in legislation and social policies.

CEDAW (1979) was adopted by the United Nations, marking a key international milestone that emphasised the global commitment to promoting women's rights and eliminating systemic inequalities.

The CEDAW Convention, which entered into force in 1981, is the result of long-term efforts by women's movements and the international community to recognise women's fundamental rights. Its acceptance reflected the global effort to ensure equal opportunities and treatment for women around the world. CEDAW has become an essential document of international human rights law, outlining the obligations of states to eliminate discrimination against women and promote gender equality. According to the CEDAW Convention (1979), signatory countries must take measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, including in legal, political, social, and economic aspects of their lives. This includes adopting appropriate legislation, es-

tablishing effective institutions to promote gender equality, and implementing preventive measures to prevent discrimination against women in all spheres of social life. CEDAW, which 189 countries have ratified, requires member states to incorporate the principles of gender equality into their laws and policies, implement measures to eliminate inequality in all areas of life, and define the comprehensive rights of women in civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields. The Convention marked an essential step towards institutionalising gender equality by establishing legal frameworks to address structural inequalities.

Modern feminist movements continue the work of early pioneers by advocating for equality in all areas of life. In contemporary times, women's rights movements also engage in digital feminist activism. Global campaigns such as the #MeToo movement highlight issues of sexual harassment and violence, emphasising the need for systemic change. #TimesUp, which started in the entertainment industry in response to sexual harassment revelations, has grown into a broader movement to combat gender discrimination and inequality in the workplace. Another notable campaign is #HeForShe, launched by the United Nations to encourage men to support gender equality and actively engage in feminist movements. Women's organisations and movements worldwide are essential in raising public awareness, advocating for policy changes, and promoting gender equality. Organisations such as the International Alliance of Women (2024) and local non-governmental organisations act as engines of change by promoting women's rights and empowerment. They strive to eliminate legislative and cultural barriers that hinder gender equality (Hassim, 2006).

In addition, the cooperation of international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union is essential to strengthen the global movement for women's rights. Initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, provide a global framework for promoting gender equality. These goals call on Member States to take action to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, violence, and inequality.

Despite international efforts and national policies, cultural norms and stereotypes have often hindered and continue to hinder real progress. Deeply rooted patriarchal patterns that permeate society still influence gender roles and society's expectations of women's behaviour.

Legal measures must be supported by educational programs and campaigns to raise awareness of gender equality. These initiatives can change the social perception of gender roles and reduce gender discrimination or sexism. Such initiatives are crucial in changing perceptions and reducing stereotypes, as they create space for greater involvement of women in all spheres of social and political life. Achieving substantive gender equality requires legislative reforms and social changes focused on education, awareness, and behaviour change.

Women's Rights and Women's Political Movements in Slovenia

The women's movement in Slovenia is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a myriad of institutional, social, and cultural influences. While it shares commonalities with women's movements in other European countries, it also exhibits distinctive features, particularly its intertwined relationship with national defence activities. This unique characteristic underscores the movement's deep-rooted connection to broader societal and political contexts.

In Slovenia, the latter half of the 19th century represents a pivotal epoch in the emergence of women in public life and the articulation of the 'woman question,' a discourse that evolved into an authentic women's movement advocating for equality by the advent of the new century. Slovenian historiography, analogous to global historiography, has predominantly centred on male experiences and contributions. Despite the substantial impact of women's contributions throughout history, historical scholarship has traditionally failed to afford them adequate recognition. Throughout the 19th century, women were predominantly depicted as literary heroines rather than acknowledged as active and influential participants in public and political spheres. Their contributions and legacies were primarily preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, literary works, and creative expressions, which often romanticised their roles rather than providing a comprehensive account of their societal contributions. This period marks the beginning of a significant transformation in the recognition and documentation of women's roles and achievements, laying the groundwork for future feminist historiography and the broader acknowledgement of women's impact on societal development. Significant changes began in the latter half of the 19th century, challenging the prevailing societal norms that largely confined women to the traditional roles of homemakers, devoted wives, and nurturing mothers. Despite the

persistence of these ideals, the actual influence and responsibilities of women within the family unit expanded considerably. Women wielded substantial influence over their husbands and played a critical role in child-rearing, often surpassing the recognition afforded by societal norms, contemporary journalism, and the perceptions of men themselves (Jogan, 2017; Šafarič, 2016; Selišnik, 2012).

This phenomenon was particularly pronounced within the burgeoning bourgeoisie. In these social strata, an inversion of traditional power dynamics was observed. It was often remarked that the higher a man's status in the elite hierarchy, the more his role within the family was reduced to that of a 'financial minister.' In such households, women were not merely passive figures but actively involved in crucial domestic decisions. These decisions encompassed various aspects of family life, from the upbringing and education of children to managing household affairs, thus indicating a more complex and nuanced reality than the superficial adherence to traditional gender roles suggested. The period marked a transitional phase where the contributions and influence of women began to assert themselves more prominently, laying the groundwork for the gradual evolution of gender roles and the eventual quest for women's rights and equality. The shift in the domestic power structure within bourgeois families is a testament to the evolving perception of women's roles, highlighting the gradual but significant changes in societal attitudes towards gender and family dynamics during this era (Šafarič, 2016).

Certain critics argued that this dynamic negatively impacted the Slovenian national movement, suggesting that bourgeois women exhibited a diminished enthusiasm for nationalism and consequently imparted this indifference to their children. Nevertheless, considering that in the ensuing decades, the Slovenian movement produced numerous staunchly nationalistic figures, many of whom were nurtured by these ostensibly 'lukewarm' mothers, such criticism appears unfounded. The evolving role of women in Slovenian society during this period reflects broader socio-political transformations. It underscores the gradual yet profound shift towards gender equality and the recognition of women's contributions beyond the private sphere (Šafarič, 2016).

Throughout its historical trajectory, the women's movement in Slovenia has navigated through four distinct phases of state formation. It emerged during the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when women

began organising and advocating for their rights within the confines of imperial governance. Subsequently, the movement persisted and adapted through the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia, lasting until 1941.

The tumultuous mid-20th century marked another pivotal period for the women's movement as it operated within the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia following World War II. This era saw significant socio-political changes, including the establishment of socialist principles that influenced the movement's goals and strategies. The subsequent transformation into the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia further shaped the landscape for women's activism, fostering both challenges and opportunities amidst evolving state policies. The movement's resilience and evolution continued into the late 20th century, culminating in Slovenia's declaration of independence in 1991 and its subsequent establishment as an independent nation-state. This new-found political landscape provided a fresh framework within which the women's movement could redefine its objectives and priorities, now operating within the context of a sovereign Slovenia (Jogan, 2017).

In the initial phase of Slovenian national development, leaders recognised the imperative of integrating women into the burgeoning national movement, particularly evident during the revolutionary climate 1848. This era saw concerted efforts to encourage women's participation in various social gatherings, national commemorations, and communal activities, underscoring their emerging role in public life. In Slovenia, within the broader Austrian context, female taxpayers gained the right to participate in municipal elections from 1849 onward, subject to the same census qualifications as their male counterparts. However, this right was exercised indirectly through a proxy system: women were required to authorise a male proxy to cast their votes on their behalf, a practice that persisted until significant electoral reforms.

Between 1861 and 1884, female taxpayers in Slovenia further secured the right to vote by proxy across all curiae (representing corporate bodies such as great landownership, cities and towns, chambers of commerce, industry, and rural communities) within the Carniolan diet. Subsequently, from 1884 onward, women's suffrage was limited to the curia of great landownership and the chamber of commerce and trade. Notably, despite these advancements, women remained excluded from voting for the parliament (Reichsrat), although they could participate in elections within the curia of great landowners.

The electoral landscape underwent additional transformations in 1896, with the introduction of a general curia granting suffrage exclusively to men, while the existing curiae continued to function separately. It was not until 1907 that the curial system, along with the fractional suffrage allotted to women, was entirely abolished with the establishment of universal and equal suffrage for men. This milestone marked a significant stride towards democratisation and electoral equality within Slovenia, reflecting broader socio-political changes in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Selišnik, 2012).

The democratisation process facilitated the establishment of numerous societies that incorporated women as members. Despite these developments, women continued to face political participation barriers. In the early 1870s, women briefly engaged with the Sokol gymnastics movement, which played a prominent role in national endeavours. Earlier, during a provocative rally by their adversaries, the German Turners, in Janče and Vevče, residents responded with physical confrontation, resulting in clashes with law enforcement. This incident led to the legal prosecution of several women involved in the confrontation (Šafarič, 2016).

Calls for greater independence among women, advocating for their education and employment opportunities, began gaining prominence, even as their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers prevailed. This shift in societal attitudes towards women, often called the 'woman question,' evolved beyond its national implications to encompass wider social dimensions, prompting active engagement from women. Notably, poet Pavlina Pajkova emerged as a leading voice in this movement, arguing that societies which marginalise women from public life are destined for 'slavery and demise.' Pajkova garnered recognition during her lifetime as one of the pioneering advocates for women's emancipation in Slovenia (Jevnikar, 2013).

This period was marked by a significant and nuanced transformation in women's perceptions and societal roles within Slovenian society. Their participation in nationalistic activities underscored their substantial but often marginalised contributions to the broader socio-political landscape of Slovenia during this era. Despite societal constraints and legal barriers, Slovenian women actively contributed to national movements, demonstrating resilience and a steadfast commitment to civic engagement (Jogan, 2017).

The shifting social dynamics at the beginning of the 20th century

fostered the rise of a cohort of Slovenian female artists, including poets, writers, painters, and other creative professionals. By decree, the Ministry of Science 1871 establishes a state women's teacher training school in Ljubljana (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.). The inception of the women's movement in Slovenia can be traced back to the establishment of the first women's branch of the Cyril and Methodius Society in Trieste in 1887. A significant objective of this branch was national defence activities. In 1897, the first Slovenian women's journal, *Slovenka*, began publication in Trieste and continued until 1903. In response to the increasingly radical organisation of the working class—exemplified by the founding of the Social Democratic Party in 1896, which officially recognised gender equality—Janez Evangelist Krek established the Catholic Society for Female Workers in 1894. This organisation was renamed Krek's Enlightenment in 1919, and it incorporated several other women's organisations, including the Union of Female Workers, the Union of Female Office Workers and Commercial Employees, and the Union of Female Servants (Jogan, 2017). In a notable milestone of academic achievement, Marija Urbas attained distinction as the first Slovenian woman to earn a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Graz in 1906 (Mlad.si, 2019). Despite these advancements, the professional landscape for women during this period was characterised by a notable increase in employment, albeit predominantly in occupations that required minimal formal education or specialised skills, resulting in comparatively lower wages. This disparity was evident even within comparable professions, where women earned less than men (Jogan, 2017; Šafarič, 2016).

In 1901, the establishment of the Christian Women's Union in Ljubljana marked a significant milestone in advocating women's rights and equality. Franja Tavčar, the wife of prominent liberal politician Ivan Tavčar, emerged as a key figure in this movement. She notably led the Women's Gymnastics Society, which achieved independence from the Ljubljana Sokol after four years of operation. Subsequently, women's gymnastics gained widespread popularity and successfully proliferated across other Sokol societies. Interestingly, despite the generally conservative stance of the Catholic camp on women's issues, the Catholic physical education organisation Orel also embraced and promoted women's gymnastics a few years later (Vodopivec, 1994).

The literary magazine *Vesna* frequently addressed these evolving developments, although its contributions to the discourse were not

groundbreaking. More influential in shaping the debate was the journal *Slovanski svet*, which prominently featured contributions from leading Slovenian female intellectuals. Despite this platform, the reception of new ideas was gradual, with even the liberal press occasionally expressing caution and scepticism. Concerns were voiced about the potential politicisation of the ‘woman question,’ underscoring the complexities and hesitations surrounding the adoption of progressive viewpoints during this period (Vodopivec, 1994).

In 1919, the Slovenian Women’s Union was established within the Slovenian Christian Social Union framework. By 1922, it underwent a restructuring to form the Slovenian Christian Union, aimed at consolidating ‘organisations of Christian-minded women’ under the auspices of Catholic social doctrine. Central to its mission was advancing women’s education across religious, social, household, and legal domains. The organisation fostered vibrant women’s and girls’ circles and commenced publishing the newsletter *Vigred* through the Orel sub-association from 1923 onwards. Notably, it annually commemorated Mother’s Day on March 25. In 1926, the Christian Women’s Society was established in Ljubljana, further enriching the landscape of organised women’s advocacy within Slovenia (Jogan, 2017).

These initial initiatives signalled the onset of organised women’s activism in Slovenia, characterised by a fusion of nationalistic, religious, and social goals. The formation of these groups was indicative of the broader socio-political climate of the time, shaped by influences from socialist ideologies and Catholic social teachings. These movements encompassed a range of ideological perspectives, advocating for national defence, social equity, and the propagation of Christian values and social doctrines (Jogan, 2017; Ramet, 2002).

The Union of Working Women and Girls (ZDŽD – Zveza delavskih žen in deklet), established in 1924 in Ljubljana, emerged as a significant force within organised women’s activism. Rooted in socialist and feminist principles, the ZDŽD’s commitment was evident through its publication of the *Ženski list*, active from October 1924 to 1935. It was underscored by a resolution adopted during International Women’s Day observance in 1926. This resolution demanded universal, equal, and secret voting rights, equality for legitimate and illegitimate children, the legalisation of old-age insurance for all workers (including domestic workers), and the responsibility of capitalist enterprises for ‘children’s homes,’ among other reforms. Initially influenced by social democrats,

the ZDŽD later increasingly aligned with the Communist Party's goal of forging a 'united front of the working class' under its leadership (Jogan, 2017).

Within the ZDŽD, there was a strong Communist fraction, including notable members such as Tončka Čeč, Anica Lokar, Poldka Kos, Štefka Zbašnik, and Milena Mohorič. These women played integral roles in combating gender-based discrimination against female labourers and championing broader workers' rights. Their activism extended to organising and endorsing labour strikes throughout the 1930s. However, due to its association with Communist activities, the ZDŽD faced prohibition and was disbanded in 1935 (Jogan, 2017; Šelih et al., 2007).

In the 1920s, the goals initially set by the ZDŽD were later adopted by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) and the Communist Party of Slovenia (KPS). This alignment was prominently articulated during the 5th National Conference in 1940 in Zagreb, where Vida Tomšič presented a comprehensive report. The conference distinguished between bourgeois feminist movements, which focused on reforms within the existing class structure, and the proletarian women's movement, which integrated women's rights advocacy with the broader struggle against class exploitation and imperialism (Jogan, 2017). Building on strategies developed throughout the 1930s, the conference outlined a proactive approach to expand the revolutionary women's movement under communist leadership. This approach emphasised mobilising women at every opportunity and utilising legal and, when necessary, clandestine methods to organise and disseminate revolutionary ideas among women, navigating the challenges posed by state surveillance of women's groups (Jogan, 2017).

Until the outbreak of World War II, the women's movement in Slovenia was characterised by divisions along class-political and religious lines. The socialist era marked a significant shift towards political unity within the movement, predominantly defined by a working-class ideology.

The Communist Party, collaborating with various organisations, fought for women's total voting rights, the realisation of the principle of equal pay for equal work, against high prices and exploitation, for women's access to all types of education and professions (as women could not, for example, become judges), for the equal status of legitimate and illegitimate children, for social protection of motherhood, for the legalisation of abortion, and for the abolition of the legal status

of the husband-father as the head of the family. The 5th Conference of the Communist Party, in particular, emphasised the significance of women's issues within the party, marking a departure from previous practices in mixed political groups where such concerns were often marginalised or paternalistically addressed (Batinić, 2015; Jogan, 2017).

Simultaneously, the 'most progressive bourgeois women's society', Ženski pokret, established in 1926 and led by Angela Vode from 1927 to 1937, pursued an expansive agenda on various fronts of women's rights. Vode's active participation in international women's organisations like the International Alliance of Women¹ and the International Council of Women² extended the society's advocacy reach. Ženski pokret advocated for women's suffrage, opposed the dismissal of married women from public service, campaigned against enforced celibacy of female teachers and civil servants, and championed abortion rights on social grounds, collaborating closely with the Union of Working Women and Girls (ZDŽD). However, the society's activities were curtailed under police surveillance in 1937, diminishing its impact and influence (Jogan, 2017)

The Slovenian Anti-Fascist Women's Association (Slovenska protifašistična ženska zveza SPŽZ) prominently featured *Naša žena* as its central publication from 1941 onward, alongside the publication of *Slovenka* in the Littoral region. The SPŽZ aimed to mobilise women in organised support of the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation and the broader national liberation struggle while also fostering political consciousness among women (Batinić, 2015). Within the National Liberation War (NOB), women assumed multifaceted roles, particularly in rural areas, functioning as political activists, couriers, and intelligence agents. Their contributions were pivotal in securing provisions, providing care for the injured, and mobilising aid for the partisan forces. Furthermore, women played a crucial role in educating children within partisan schools. They progressively assumed positions in the local leadership structures of the Liberation Front and the Communist Party in the final phases of the conflict (Bernik Burja, 2002; Deželak - Barić, 1999).

In alignment with the strategy of advancing gender equality alongside national and social liberation efforts, Slovenian women were grant-

¹ <https://womenalliance.org>

² <https://www.icw-cif.com>

ed active and passive voting rights through a decree issued by the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front (IO OF – Izvršni odbor Osobodilne fronte) on May 17, 1942. These rights applied to women residing in liberated territories under partisan control during the occupation. At the assembly of Slovene representatives held in Kočevje in October 1943, women constituted 10.8% of the delegates (62 out of 572), marking their active participation in parliamentary affairs as they comprised 10% of the members of the Supreme Plenum of the OF. Subsequently, these voting rights were formally enshrined in the constitution of 1946, culminating in a struggle spanning nearly half a century for Slovenian women to attain suffrage. Before this, during the Austro-Hungarian era, limited municipal voting rights were granted to a few women in 1907 based on their economic status as taxpayers, albeit exercised through male proxies. In the subsequent Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), these rights were initially promised but not fully realised (Jogan, 2017).

Following liberation, substantial strides towards gender equality were enshrined in the inaugural constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FLRJ) in January 1946. Article 24 of the constitution unequivocally declared: 'Women are equal with men in all state, economic, and social life domains. Women have the right to equal pay for equal work and benefit from special safeguards in employment. The state specifically safeguards the interests of mothers and children by establishing maternity hospitals, children's homes, and care facilities, and by granting mothers the entitlement to paid leave prior to and following childbirth.' This constitutional provision marked a significant commitment to gender parity and social welfare, affirming comprehensive rights for women within the post-liberation Yugoslav state (Jogan, 2017).

In the immediate post-liberation years, amidst challenging economic circumstances, the Anti-Fascist Women's Front (AFŽ – Antifašistična fronta žena or SPŽZ – Slovenska protifašistična ženska zveza) played a pivotal role in mobilising support for the nascent authority and advancing an emancipatory agenda. As an integral part of the Liberation Front, the AFŽ educated women politically and addressed specific practical challenges women face. The introduction of self-management policies in 1950 and the subsequent transformation of the Liberation Front (OF) into the Socialist Alliance of Working People (SZDL – Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva) led to the reassess-

ment of the necessity of a distinct women's organisation. This reconsideration was articulated during the 4th Congress in 1953 by Vida Tomšič, who argued against the misconception that women needed to engage in a separate struggle from the broader society to secure their rights, a potentially divisive notion. Consequently, the AFŽ underwent a reorganisation into the Association of Women's Societies of Yugoslavia, integrating various women's groups under the auspices of the SZDL. The dissolution of the separate albeit largely symbolic women's organisation was underpinned by the recognition that addressing the 'women's issue' – including combating pervasive gender discrimination – was not solely the responsibility of women but a matter of broader societal concern (Jogan, 2017).

The necessity for meaningful political engagement of women within the new self-managing framework was underscored by calls for the acknowledgement of women's education and expertise in facilitating their integration into political spheres from the outset of the Association of Women's Societies. Nevertheless, the idea that women should participate in politics solely based on gender was firmly dismissed (Jogan, 2017).

In 1961, the Association transformed the Conference for the Social Activity of Women, and starting from 1976, its functions were assumed by the Council for Socioeconomic and Political Status of Women within the Presidency of the Socialist Alliance of Working People (SZDL). Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, these organisations focused on instituting policies that would primarily enhance material conditions to better facilitate the balance between professional work and personal life, with a particular emphasis on improving conditions for women. However, it was explicitly recognised that this objective fell under men's and women's jurisdiction and responsibility (Jogan, 2017).

However, with the establishment of an independent state of Slovenia, this unity fragmented once more along the lines of class, political affiliation, and, to some extent, religious orientation. The post-independence period witnessed divergent priorities and strategies among various women's groups, reflecting broader societal divisions and ideological differences that continue to shape the contemporary landscape of women's activism in Slovenia. The development of the women's movement in Slovenia reflects broader European trends while responding to specific national contexts. The intertwining of the movement with national defence efforts is a distinctive characteristic, setting it apart from its counterparts in other European nations. Further-

more, the transition from gender discrimination to gender egalitarianism marks significant ideological shifts that parallel broader socio-political changes in the region (Allcock, 2000; Ramet, 2002).

Conclusion

Throughout history, women have persistently confronted gender inequalities. The global trajectory of women's rights spans diverse epochs and geographical contexts, characterised by significant milestones, persistent challenges, and transformative movements. From ancient civilisations where patriarchal norms entrenched women in subordinate roles to contemporary struggles for gender equality, women have tirelessly advocated for their rights and reshaped societal attitudes towards gender roles. This journey towards gender equality reflects a narrative of progress, setbacks, and ongoing challenges necessitating sustained commitment and collective action from governments, civil society, and international organisations.

Women's resilience and the solidarity of feminist movements worldwide have been instrumental in advancing legal reforms, raising awareness about gender issues, and fostering solidarity across diverse communities. Despite these efforts, achieving substantive gender equality remains an unfinished agenda, evident in persistent disparities across various spheres of life, including economic opportunities, political representation, and access to justice.

Moving forward, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality must prioritise intersectional approaches that address challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds and identities. Educational reforms, cultural interventions, and policy initiatives are essential components of a holistic strategy to dismantle barriers to gender equality and create inclusive societies where individuals can thrive irrespective of gender.

The journey towards gender equality in Slovenia exemplifies the complexities of women's activism within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. Since gaining independence, Slovenia's women's movement has navigated societal norms, legal frameworks, and shifts in the political landscape, reflecting broader European trends while retaining distinct national characteristics.

Initially unified by aspirations for gender equality and political representation, Slovenia's women's movement soon encountered fragmentation along lines of class, political ideology, and religious affiliation. These divisions underscore the multifaceted nature of women's

activism in Slovenia, where varied priorities and strategies emerged among different women's groups. These developments mirrored broader societal divisions and ideological differences, influencing feminist advocacy and policymaking in the country.

The integration of Slovenia's women's movement with national defence efforts distinguishes it from other European contexts, highlighting women's roles in safeguarding national sovereignty and advancing gender equality amidst societal transformations. Slovenia's evolution from addressing overt gender discrimination to advocating gender egalitarianism reflects significant ideological shifts coinciding with broader socio-political changes following independence.

Despite strides, challenges persist on the path to gender equality in Slovenia and globally. Deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices continue to impede women's full participation in social, economic, and political spheres. Addressing these barriers requires sustained efforts to dismantle gender biases and promote inclusive policies empowering women across all life aspects. While legal reforms have been pivotal in advancing women's rights, they must be complemented by educational initiatives and awareness campaigns challenging stereotypes and transforming societal perceptions of gender roles.

Internationally, initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, provide a critical framework for global efforts to advance women's rights. These goals urge governments and stakeholders to take decisive action to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, violence, and inequality. The involvement of international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union, is crucial in supporting national efforts and fostering global cooperation towards achieving gender parity.

In Slovenia, initiatives aimed at empowering women in politics and beyond have shown promise. Organisations like the Slovenian Women's Lobby and political parties' programs dedicated to women's political participation have increased women's visibility and influence in decision-making processes. However, ongoing efforts are needed to address remaining gaps, including achieving more balanced representation in leadership roles and providing enhanced support for women's leadership development across sectors.

Education emerges as a pivotal arena for driving societal change towards gender equality. By integrating gender perspectives into school

curricula, promoting inclusive educational practices, and fostering critical thinking about gender norms from a young age, Slovenia can cultivate a future generation equipped to challenge stereotypes and advocate for gender equity. University programs are crucial in advancing gender studies and preparing students to engage critically with gender equality issues in professional and academic spheres.

Slovenia's experience with its women's movement offers valuable insights into the complexities of achieving gender equality within a dynamic and evolving societal landscape. By learning from both successes and challenges, Slovenia can continue to lead efforts in promoting gender equality regionally and globally, fostering a future where all individuals, regardless of gender, can realise their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

In conclusion, the ongoing struggle for women's rights is integral to broader social justice and human rights movements, underscoring the interconnectedness of gender equality with the pursuit of a more just and equitable world for future generations. Sustained commitment from all sectors of society is essential to overcome remaining barriers and achieve substantive gender equality. This includes addressing gaps in legal protections, challenging discriminatory practices, and promoting inclusive policies that enable women to thrive economically, politically, and socially. The journey towards gender equality is continuous, requiring steadfast advocacy, solidarity among women and allies, and unwavering support for advancing women's rights as integral to the broader human rights agenda.

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