



Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Founding of the Association for the Promotion of Employment Qualification among Members of the Female Sex (Retrospective, 1891)

The passage from this 1891 retrospective of the Association for the Promotion of Employment Qualification among Members of the Female Sex, published on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, describes the association's focus on improving job opportunities for middle-class women. With a male founder and mostly male board members, the association was hardly a feminist or oppositional group. Nevertheless, it attracted notice as well as the support of the Prussian Crown Princess Victoria.

III. Founding of the Association for the Promotion of Employment Qualifications among Members of the Female Sex

The Executive Board and Committee of the Central Association devoted its entire meeting on November 8, 1865, to considering the memorandum and, after quite thorough deliberations, arrived at the decision that the association was entitled and obligated to take up the women's question in the direction addressed in the memorandum, to promote it in speech and writing, and to immediately arrange for a public discussion of this highly important matter in connection with the next General Assembly. For further deliberation of the matter, a commission was appointed, which worked exceedingly diligently and received numerous letters and suggestions from the public, proof that the matter had immediately found much appeal. At its meeting on November 15, 1865, the commission agreed to recommend the following propositions for approval:

1. Although the work of women in the family is and remains the first and most important task of the female calling, commercial, craft, and industrial occupations must not be closed to the female sex.
2. The female sex, which in Germany at present is less engaged in such employment than in other countries, is perfectly suited for gainful employment in most commercial and technical activities.
3. Since wages must be based on performance, there is no justification for paying less for women's work than for men's work of equal value.
4. In order to improve the skills and earning potential of girls who, on the basis of comprehensive training, wish to pursue gainful employment, we recommend the establishment of schools for continuing vocational education.

5. Instruction should be limited to the necessary subjects, and the students' participation should be left to their own discretion, as far as the various subjects are concerned. The school only has to provide the opportunity for learning, to the extent necessary.

6. In addition to lessons, it is advisable for the preparatory training of the students to receive practical instruction in commercial and industrial businesses whose owners are willing and able to offer such.

7. It is highly desirable to establish associations, especially women's associations, which, with the support of elected men, pursue the above-mentioned ways and means of expanding and improving the fields of employment for women, in order to achieve the intended success.

[. . .]

On December 13, 1865, the great hall of the English House was packed with an assembly composed of men and women from the most intelligent classes of Berlin society. The question raised by President Lette had struck all circles of the population like a lightning bolt. It was vigorously debated in every family, in every social gathering, finding enthusiastic supporters and determined opponents; nonetheless, the sharpest point of ill will, prejudice, and ridicule had been blunted from the very start. For the person who had made himself the champion of the cause was too pure, too untouchable for any of that, and he also opened the assembly in his simple and heart-warming way.

“The matter recommends itself equally from the perspective of humanity and justice and from that of the national economy,” President Lette said after his words of welcome [. . .].

[The first constitutive meeting took place on February 27, 1866. The association numbered 300 members and was named: Association for the Promotion of Employment Qualifications among Members of the Female Sex.]

President Lette was able to open the meeting with the happy news that Her Royal Highness the Crown Princess had expressed her gracious support for the efforts of the association through a letter from her cabinet secretary, the Chamberlain Major von Normann, support even confirmed by a gift of 500 talers.

This was the first time that the name of the exalted woman had been mentioned in connection with the Association for the Promotion of Employment Qualifications among Members of the Female Sex and this name would henceforth remain most intimately interwoven with the association's history. We find it on every page of this history, not only as the protectress, which she became at the request of the newly elected board, but also as a wise and far-sighted advisor, active helper, patroness, and friend who never lost sight of the places where the association was working during the happiest of times and the most terrible, always holding her protecting hand over them.

[. . .]

V. The Organization of the Association and Its Initial Years of Activity.

The statute of the association set the following goals, the pursuit of which was supposed to be given priority:

1. Removal of the biases and obstacles to the gainful employment of women; 2. Promotion of educational institutions to provide training for a commercial and industrial purpose; 3. Provision of industrial training opportunities and the mediation of relations between male and female workers, unless adequate provision has already been made for this purpose by existing institutions; 4. Establishment of places to sell and exhibit female handicrafts and artistic products; 5. Protection of self-supporting working persons of the female sex from discrimination in moral or economic terms, preferably through verification of suitable opportunities for housing and board.

[. . .]

Source: *Geschichte der fünfundzwanzigjährigen Wirksamkeit (1866 bis 1891) des unter dem Protektorat Ihrer Majestät der Kaiserin und Königin Friedrich stehenden Lette-Vereins zur Förderung höherer Bildung und Erwerbsfähigkeit des weiblichen Geschlechts Beteiligte Personen und Organisationen*. Festschrift for the 25th Anniversary of the Lette Association 1866–1891 [Lette-Verein, 1891], pp. 8–11, 17–18.

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