Alojzija Štebi, “Mišljenje javnosti i feminizam u Jugoslaviji”
(Public Opinion and Feminism in Yugoslavia)
Ženski pokret [Women’s Movement] 9 (1924), 376–379

Translated and introduced by Isidora Grubački

ABSTRACT
This contribution is a translation of a speech given by the president of the Yugoslav Feminist Alliance, Alojzija Štebi, to the second conference of the Little Entente of Women (LEW) in Belgrade in 1924. The introduction contextualizes the source, introduces Alojzija Štebi through a biographical note, and offers a glimpse into Yugoslav women’s participation in the Little Entente of Women. It shows that Štebi’s conceptualization of feminism was inseparable from politics, called for political reform, and invited the members of the LEW to move toward the full-scale participation of women in politics and state affairs.

KEYWORDS: Alojzija Štebi, Feminist Alliance, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, Little Entente of Women, politics, suffrage

After meeting in 1923 in Bucharest, Romania, for the first conference of the Little Entente of Women (LEW), the representatives of LEW member organizations from Czechoslovakia, Greece, Romania, Poland, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia (henceforth the Kingdom SHS) met between 30 October and 3 November 1924 for the second LEW congress in Belgrade. It was one of the biggest and most significant events that the women had organized in the Kingdom SHS until that moment, with representatives from various women’s organizations present, and with a broad press coverage greater than at any time before. The November and December 1924 issues of the Belgrade-based feminist journal Ženski pokret (Women’s Movement, 1920–1938) were dedicated entirely to the LEW conference. Because the LEW did not manage to attain its goal of having its own periodical publication, these
two issues offer a unique source and a precious insight into the discussions that were held during the 1924 conference. The conference focused on many issues, the central one being the legal rights of children born out of wedlock. Another important aspect of the conference concerned the “feminist question” in the countries of the LEW, and the translated excerpt included here is the speech that Alojzija Štebi (1883–1956, born in Ljubljana), the president of Feministička aliijansa (the Feminist Alliance, FA), gave at the session dedicated to this topic on the Yugoslav case. As I suggest elsewhere, in order to enhance our understanding of the LEW, it is useful to explore the interconnectedness between the national levels on the one hand and the transnational level on the other, and to seek out the ways that these levels mutually formed each other. With this in mind, the excerpt and the context in which it was spoken give us a broader understanding of not only how some members of the Yugoslav feminist movement understood feminism, but also what they expected from the LEW, an organization they perceived as “purely feminist.”

A couple of words about Alojzija Štebi and the establishment of the Feminist Alliance in the Kingdom SHS are in order. Born in 1883 in Ljubljana, then Austria-Hungary, and educated for the profession of a teacher, in 1914 Štebi quit her teaching job and joined the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party in Ljubljana, for which she worked for years as an organizer and an editor of its journals. Among these journals was the first women’s social democratic journal in Ljubljana, Ženski list (Women’s Paper, 1913), which was only briefly issued due to the lack of financial support. In 1917, still in Austria-Hungary, she began to work for the Ministry of Social Politics, and remained in similar positions in Ljubljana and Belgrade until her death in 1956. After the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, Štebi supported the establishment of the Kingdom SHS. Leaving the party in 1919, she began her activism in various women’s organizations; she actively worked for closer cooperation between newly formed feminist organizations whose goals were, among other things, legal equality between the sexes and women’s suffrage rights. After the Constitutional Assembly of the Kingdom SHS in 1921 left the issue of suffrage rights to be solved by the parliament, Štebi became one of the leading women seeking cooperation among all feminists in the country, and suggested that Ženski pokret become the official journal of all feminists from the Kingdom SHS. In September 1923, she initiated the establishment of the statewide, self-proclaimed network Feminist Alliance (FA) and became its president, keeping this position when the FA was restructured in 1926 and renamed Alijansa ženskih pokreta (Women’s Movements’ Alliance). Moreover, Štebi was a delegate of the Kingdom SHS at the conference of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) held in May 1923 in Rome, where the LEW was established. The formalization of Yugoslav feminists’ cooperation in the FA and the establishment of the LEW should not be seen as two independent processes, but rather as entangled processes that mutually formed each other; the rise of cooperation led to a greater delegation in Rome, while the establishment of the LEW in Rome further prompted the establishment of the FA—a statewide alliance that would become an affiliate of the LEW and the IWSA. The previous description used the term “feminist” and “feminists,” relying primarily on the language used by the historical actors. In the Yugoslav case, the Feminist Alliance was the first organization to include this label in its name, and it could be
argued that with its establishment the term was “institutionalized.” The meaning of this term should not be taken for granted, and the arguments of Alojzija Štebi in this excerpt and in another speech at the 1924 LEW conference show her conscious effort to put forward her ideas of feminism, and to define feminist ideology. According to the report in Ženski pokret, the “feminist question” was discussed at the LEW conference in terms of the methods useful for what they called the propaganda of feminism. However, the Yugoslav feminists proposed to discuss more broadly the main (feminist) principles that would serve as the basis of the LEW’s work in the future. The translated excerpt is Štebi’s discussion of the methods of feminism, and her intervention represents a rather interesting perspective on feminism and feminist activism, because, in her view, feminism centered (not only, as expected) around the question of women’s suffrage rights; instead, the “evolution of feminism” was inseparable from the political life of the country in different ways. First, she saw the internal politics of the country as a precondition for the positive development of feminism. Closely entangled with this was the second prerequisite for the development of feminism, which Štebi saw in the reform of political parties in the country. Her main point of criticism was that political parties should be based on political principles, rather than on the particular interests of certain religious or language groups. In order to understand this better in its own context, it is important to bear in mind that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was a post-Habsburg and post-Ottoman country, established in 1918 as a centralized constitutional and parliamentary monarchy that connected different historical territories with differing legal and political traditions, nominally connecting what were considered to be three Yugoslav tribes: Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs. Among the most popular political parties were the People’s Radical Party (Serbian), the Slovenian People’s Party, the Croatian Peasant Party, and the Yugoslav Muslim organization. As the excerpt shows, Štebi considered only the Social Democratic Party and the Independent Workers’ Party of Yugoslavia to be based on what she considered a clear political program. Criticizing this kind of division, Štebi asserted that only with political reform would women (as well as men) be able to think beyond existing political lines. Finally, she criticized the women’s movement in Kingdom SHS, arguing that of all the women’s organizations in the country, only twelve would accept feminist ideas without restriction. Without explicitly defining feminism, however, Štebi implied that feminism was, above all, political and dependent on politics. This is why, at the center of the FA’s work, Štebi put the need for women to free themselves from their inhibition to do public work or to participate in politics. Her implicit interlocutors could have been men and women who thought that public work was not for women—but also, in certain ways, Yugoslav representative Delfa Ivanić and Romanian representative Alexandrina Cantacuzino, whose discussions of feminism were fairly different from Štebi’s, as for them feminism encompassed Christianity, women in medieval times, and harmony between men and women, among other aspects.4

By conceptualizing the inseparable character of feminism and politics in this way, Štebi in fact proposed not only a specific understanding of feminism (where women would participate directly in politics), but also a reconceptualization of politics overall. Her demands were, in fact, a call for the complete reconfiguration of political life. Together with her second speech on “state and duties” at the same session of the con-
ference, in which she further developed some of the issues mentioned in this excerpt, Štebi’s intervention can be understood as a proposal concerning what the orientation of the newly founded LEW could be, and, finally, an invitation to all the members of the LEW to move away from the traditionalist understanding of politics and toward a full-scale participation of women in the affairs of the state.

PUBLIC OPINION AND FEMINISM IN YUGOSLAVIA

Alojzija Štebi

The organized feminist movement in Yugoslavia is still young. So far, it has not had an opportunity to come forward with an important activity with which officials would be obliged to deal. From time to time, at convenient moments, weak feminist movements were formed in various centers of our homeland. But all activities of the feminist world have had only passing successes. Much has been said and written, plans have been made for broad and persistent action, but unfortunately, all this has not been noted as a sign of the beginning of this organized work, neither in terms of the feminist aims—suffrage rights—nor in terms of the entirety of the problems, as are these with which we are dealing at this conference.

Public opinion about the various issues of interest for a nation is best expressed in the press and in political parties. If one takes a look at our newspapers, one will notice that public opinion has so far paid little attention to the feminist movement. However, one should not be surprised by this. Our country, during these few years since its formation, has not been able to solve even the many problems of its domestic policy, whose positive solution is the main condition for the progress of the people and the country. Due to their importance for the consolidation and the possibility of the survival of our homeland, these problems have attracted the attention of the entirety of public opinion. As long as the internal circumstances in our country do not take their normal course, it will not be possible to expect the audience to be very interested in the feminist question. But we must state that newspapers nevertheless do write about feminist aspirations and discuss them favorably. In addition to newspapers, magazines also discuss our aims prudently and sympathetically. All this brings us to the conclusion that feminism in our country does not encounter insurmountable obstacles, but on the contrary, it will be gladly accepted; we just need to wait for the psychological moment that is completely suitable, so that great successes can be achieved in all parts of our country.

No political party seems to oppose, in principle, our main demand: the right to vote for women. What is more, their statements, which are rather platonic, give us evidence that they do not oppose our right to vote. Of course, this conclusion should be received with reservations. So far, indeed, no political party has taken any action in terms of feminist demands. According to the mentality of today’s politicians, we cannot expect that they will stand up for any grand ideas, because all plans for their action are directed to the immediate profit of their party. The fact that political parties are still reluctant to include feminist demands in their programs should be explained by the fact that women are not yet organized in political parties, with the exception
of the Social Democratic and Independent Workers’ Party of Yugoslavia. In a political party based on the principles of the Catholic faith, women indeed also cooperate, but only in educational sections, and they do not deal with purely political issues.

All our political parties had the opportunity to express their opinion on women’s suffrage. This was during the constitution of the constituent assembly in 1921. [The assembly] adopted by a majority of votes Article 70 of the Constitution, the first paragraph, [according to which] every citizen turned 21 years old has suffrage rights, but the third paragraph of the same article immediately restricts this regulation by adding: “A special law will decide about women’s suffrage rights.” All this leads us to believe that our parliament today would reject with the majority of votes the petition that would demand suffrage rights for women, and with this it would in fact reject the main feminist demand. In our opinion, our political parties must undergo evolution before it is possible that they change their opinion in our favor, [and they must] move from petty politics to politics of ideas and principles.

With the exception of the Social Democratic Party and the Independent Workers’ Party of Yugoslavia, which are too weak to have any impact on our political life, no political party is spread across the whole country. All important political parties, which play a decisive role in our country, have a certain ethnographic or religious color. Attempts of certain parties of the democratic, radical, and peasant parties to spread to all parts of the country, and to gather supporters in their midst regardless of religion or language, are at the very beginning, unable to move forward; all these parties are more or less still at the same point as they were before the unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

This is an indisputable fact that seems very important for the development of feminism. The influence of this kind of policy is felt also among women; they are not yet able to free themselves to think and act differently from what politicians instruct them to do. The reorganization of political parties, based on economic and social principles, will inevitably have good consequences for feminist evolution.

Finally, it is interesting to know what women themselves think about the issues that particularly interest them. The best answer to this question can be given through the opinion that prevails in the National Women’s Alliance, which has 250 women’s associations among its members. Among these large numbers of women’s organizations, there would be maybe twelve, at most, that accept feminist ideas without restriction. Concerning several points of our program, such as: equalization of women before the law; improved destinies for illegitimate children; schooling of female children: equal reward for equal work; equalization of morals for both sexes, etc., it can be said, without any doubt, that there are many more organizations that want joint action on this broad social program.

Concerning women’s suffrage rights, the positive solution of which is the only thing that would enable the success of our program, it is very doubtful that all organized women in the National Women’s Alliance would support it without any restrictions. Our women do not pay enough attention to this capital issue, calculating that it is best to stay away from everything related to politics. It is a prejudice instilled in a woman, which needs to be eradicated. This task falls in particular within the scope of work of the Feminist Alliance, which was founded last year and which accepts only
feminist organizations as members. So far, the Feminist Alliance has undertaken only one important activity, namely the protection of children and youth, and in addition it has acted with its authority in special cases, where the interests of women were harmed. The Alliance will undertake efforts to increase women’s interest in all issues of particular concern and, through its supporters, to exert a direct influence on public opinion. First of all, all women’s scruples, mostly traditional ones, which they have concerning public work, must be overturned. Then, they need to be convinced that participation in political life is not the privilege of certain people, but the duty of all citizens. Every citizen of a country, whether a woman or a man, has a duty to take part in the most important branch of social activity.

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◊ Notes


4. Ibid.