

Did First World War Cause An Inner Conflict Among European First Wave Feminists?

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As it is known, First Wave Feminism, which commenced with the declaration of Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, refers to a period of feminist activism during the French Revolution in the late 19th century. The First World War constituted the cornerstone for this feminist movement as the war was the cause of first separation within the First Wave Feminism. In this century, feminist were impressed by French Revolution, and they based feminist movement on the theme of the women's universal human rights. Today's feminists inherited the legacy of this movement. However, First Wave Feminists were criticized particularly by Second Wave Feminists and also have been criticized since then. They were accused of limiting the issues of feminism and the area of the feminist movement only to working, voting, divorce, education rights of women. This approach adopted by First Wave feminists was judged by successors as being far away from questioning the traditional position of women and masculine values. According to critics, this approach was not useful in terms of transforming the traditional roles of women and norms of femininity.

Most of the feminists, belonging to First Wave, like Jane Adams, Elizabeth Stanton, C. Eastmann, insisted on advocating for the voting rights of all women regardless of their race, ethnicity and nation as the main cause of the movement. They argued that women's rights, especially the right to vote were crucial for paving the way for international partnership among women. The international tone of their calls became clear with the First World War. They addressed to all women in the world by encouraging them to embrace the values which they defined as feminine like peace, self-devotion and unselfishness against the norms which they deemed masculine and dangerous for humanity and human rights such as war. Second Wave feminists, like Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Simone De Beauvoir, argued that feminist struggle limiting itself to some fundamental rights such as the right to vote, prevented women from transforming traditional domestic roles of women like mothering, nursing, housekeeping, etc.

Likewise, feminists adopting a national stance in that century were criticized by radical feminists of second wave on similar grounds. Because when the war broke out, those feminists chose national aims over feminist goals. They defended the idea that all women

who loved their country had to abandon feminist wills for the sake of their community's liberation. The pro-war approach of them was strongly criticized as being a classical form of traditional womanhood. Women were advised to be mother, wife, and supporter of men. Thus the feminists adopting a pro-war approach during The First World War were depicted as uncompromising. This article questions those criticisms, which we also come across as "equality or difference" debate of feminism. This article draws on the gender perspective of feminist analyst Leonore Davidoff who warns us to be cautious when analyzing presence of women in public sphere. Davidoff emphasizes the distinction between the women who prioritize their class/national/ethnic/cultural identities and the women who give priority their femininity. According to this perspective, which will be adopted throughout this essay, the periodic meaning of the terms like public, class, nation etc. needs to be reconsidered in accordance with the presence of women in many areas of public sphere. Accordingly, traditional meaning of terms like private, public, family are deconstructed.

Adopting Davidoff' perspective, it can be noticed that both the demands of nationalistic feminists and pacifist feminists who insisted on the rights of women as the core issue of the women's movement were not uncompromising. Such an understanding allows us to see that the boundary between Second Wave feminists' claims and First Wave feminists' arguments is not as clear as it was thought to be, but blurred. Accordingly, this essay asserts that this division among women bears more similarities rather than implying a distinct boundary and that this line between claims of feminists who preferred to deny their feminist goals and pacifist feminists are actually parallel to each other. This similarity and association come to light against the critics of second wave feminists. For example, cannot we consider that the establishment of "Women Army Corps" (WAAC) in Britain in 1917 as an achievement of women who were in the public sphere for defending their national identity? This can be deemed an achievement as it shattered the traditional codes of femininity. Or in Germany, did not feminists reject the male control over women when they were struggling to take control of "Women's Bureau" just when they seemed to act in compliance with politics of national economy? Actually women's involvement in the Women's Bureau helped undermine the structure of the Bureau dominated by men and masculine values. Can we not claim that although it reproduced the classic "devoted women" trope, upper class women joining the Red Cross and working as nurses in the frontline encountering blood, death, wound, dirtiness, transformed the image of bourgeois women identified with smartness, chastity, purity, when they were in the middle of blood, death, wound, dirtiness as nurses in the front line. This essay demonstrates that the different goals and politics of First Wave Feminists, defined in opposition to the each other, can sometimes actually create similar effects.

The Claims of Liberal/Suffragists Feminists

In the 18th century, liberal doctrine emphasizing the individual rights and equality of opportunity had a great influence on women. Liberal thinkers believe that society should be organized in accordance with certain unchangeable and inviolable human rights like right to life, liberty and right of property. Liberal feminists shared this belief and focused on women's ability to achieve gender equality through their own actions and choices. They

asserted that female subordination in society was rooted in a set of legal constraints; because, according to them, those legal barriers prevented women from entering public life and obtaining men's advantages. For this reason, they founded groups and organizations such as the *National Women's Trade Union College*, the *National Women's Party*, the *Women's Joint Congressional Committee* (Donovan 127). Their demands ranged from equal pay to equal access to education, citizenship. They criticized the laws that had banned the abortion, divorce and tolerated domestic violence and sexual harassment. Traditional beliefs about gender were built on the ideas that women and men were essentially different and that women were deprived of men's intelligence and capacity, so they had to be property of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. First Wave Feminists argued that the law was shaped around these beliefs about gender.

For the popular feminists of this period such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Stanton, Susan Anthony, Francis Wright, Harriet Taylor, the Equal Rights Amendment was a key goal (Donovan 31). They were strong advocates of especially the right to vote. For example, Wollstonecraft encouraged women to be active in their lives and repudiated the idea that women are more emotional than men by nature. In her opinion, this prejudice was used as a tool to perpetuate inferior, subordinated position of women in society. By means of this tool, there was not any alternative for women to be able to go on their life except for finding a husband, being dependent on men (Mitchell 1966). In her famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792, Wollstonecraft depicted the middle class women as the "doll of men in a cage". A key concern with education run in her works and remained a dominant theme. Since the time women were born, they are taught that their beauty is their only asset and their mind is being shaped accordingly" (Donovan, 43). Similarly, Sarah Grimke criticized chivalric attitudes of men because this perception had prevented women from developing their capacities as if they were creatures incapable of protecting themselves (Donovan, 51). Donovan also drew attention to that Stanton criticized harshly the "true women" category in this century like Wollstonecraft. Idealized by bourgeois class, "true woman" was white and middle class and described as delicate, moral, clean, slim, soft, and weak (51).

At first glance, these criticisms seem to reflect norms of the bourgeoisie. It has been already criticized by the Second Wave feminists for this reason. However, if the social status of women in that century is revisited, it is seen that those criticisms did not reflect merely the challenges upper class women encountered. Their wishes were the wishes that would change not only the lives of bourgeois women, but also the lives of all women in the country. According to Juliet Mitchell and Hagar Kotef, those women demanded education, divorce, property rights not just for the women of their class (1996; 2009); they were speaking on behalf of all women in the world, all women deprived of liberty, freedom and justice.

In the 19th Century, the notion of "human" was defined in relation to particular capacities and rights. The ones who could move in public spheres, who could earn his living, who could bring his body before courts were accepted as "human". Being deprived of these, women were not accepted as human. Therefore, First Wave feminists saw the problem as shared problem for all women around the world; they believed that this struggle was their

universal connection. So when the war commenced, women's activism had already been shaped by the legal individual rights of women especially the right to vote to a large extent. For example, *FSF* in France organized pro-vote marches. Similarly in Great Britain street meetings and protests were organized in London by suffragists. Those meetings and marches included women from all over the world (Thebaud 34). Hence, they blamed the feminists who gave up their feminist struggle for betraying feminists goals. They said that their approach was harming the international coalition of women. Surely, by taking a national stance, some feminists kept a distance between themselves and universal women's coalitions. For example, a famous feminist journal *La Francase* in France wrote: "*This is not a time to talk about our rights*" (Thebaud 36-37). Shortly after that, national feminists gave up addressing to all women in the world and they addressed only the women of their country.

However, does this mean that national feminists had not deconstructed any traditional norms? That is where Davidoff's argument comes in.

Davidoff's Thesis

Leonore Davidoff asserts that political movements using different methods and strategies in public sphere may share the same or similar goals in reality or the movements using the similar discourse and methods may turn out to be incompatible with each other. Hence, evaluating only the discourse and strategies may be deceptive. In this respect, instead of being limited by their discourses, words or strategies, she proposes to focus on the consequences of the movements and intentions that had urged them to be active in public spheres (11-31). Moreover, she particularly draws attention to the historical conditions prevailing at that particular period when analyzing their gains. Davidoff believes that measuring the gains of women by using today's terms is a dangerous method, which may offer a distorted picture of their positive contributions to gender relations.

Having used dissimilar discourses and methods, these two groups were sometimes defined as opposed to each other, whereas both of them were defending the same goal in some cases such as women's freedom and activism in public life. So during the First World War, was the role of women to be crying mothers, self-denying wives or volunteer maid servants of war? Did the results of their service for the war always support the patriarchal norms? Some feminist researchers especially the post-modernist feminists such as Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz, Joan Scott, etc. have argued that there is not a single type of motherhood and wifehood, and male dominance has never been unrestricted. Similarly, Davidoff says that none of the patriarchal or hierarchical, traditional gender norms are unchangeable (11-31). In accordance with these, drawing on the case of women involved in the war in the First World War, this article shows that those gender norms sometimes can be used as tools to deconstruct and reshape norms themselves. When analyzing Western or European women during First World War, we should not forget the war was not a male activity because women had taken up the roles, jobs and areas previously associated with men. Women gained new skills, perspectives and were led into different types of femininities. So how can one claim that war had not changed anything in gender relations during this period and later on?

Supporters of Both Nation and Women

Most of the feminist documents underline the fact that during war many of the suffragists had used a new keyword: “*Service*”, “Service to men who were on fronts” was their new key word that carried them forward in the public sphere. To this aim, they declared that they abandoned their voting or individual rights demands. They believed that it was the most difficult time for their country and insisting on voting rights during such a difficult time would be so selfish. Instead, they became primary actors of charities in France, Germany and England. For example, Marguerite Dorand wrote in *La Frande*, a famous feminist journal in France: “*Ladies, our country needs you. Whether our demand, (vote right) will be accepted or not it is time to prove we are citizens of this country.*” (Thebaud 36-37). Moreover, *Le Franciaise* addressed to women as follows: “We cannot speak about our individual rights when our country was suffering from the war.” And also Pankhursts in England changed the name of their *Suffragists* Journal as *Britain*.

Undoubtedly, even if their arguments sounded as though they were supporters of war, actually they were also carrying feminist undertones. If we remember what suffragists demanded (individual rights of women), it becomes clearer. They demanded women’s consciousness and movement to expand in all spheres of life and that women emerge as primary actors in the state institutions just like men. Therefore, statements mentioned above were, on the one hand, inviting women to give up their feminists goals, but on the other hand, they were inviting women to prove that they had equal capacities with men as citizens. This emphasis demonstrated that they had not completely given up their demands for which they struggled before the war. Because, the war gave them a chance to fill the empty spots left after the men was drafted to the war. Jobs like tax collection, street car driving, and teaching were occupied by women. That’s why, Sandra Gilbert depicted this period as “astounding festival of women” (Thebaud 46). The responsibilities women undertook were those, neither women themselves nor the societies were used to. For example, in Britain, middle-class women were hired to work at farms and also worked as police officers in the cities. Additionally, French Minister called on French women to work on farms. He said: “Take the place of men in labor force.” This call was really subversive one when we consider the very popular definition of femininity in that time. Depicted as physically thin and elegant, women were considered unfit for physical labor. Suffragists discussed this problem, and demanded that women should not be denied entry into occupations. Enter, although their demands were refused before the war. But now, women were gaining entry to a variety of occupation. Working, once a distant ideal for women in Europe, was becoming an acceptable idea after the war loomed large over the Europe. Does not this imply a change in gender relations or norms? In that case, by attending to the callings of the state, were women realizing one of the goals of the First Wave Feminists or not? Female tailors were hired in the military supplies sectors, girdles were placed into factories producing tents and uniforms for soldiers, the women who had never worked before war learnt how to produce uniforms, missiles, and gas masks. Women, sometimes, produced these materials at home.

When they were producing gas masks, uniforms for soldiers at home, women turned home into an economic sphere. By hosting the wounded or soldiers at their home like some peasants women did in those days (Thebaud, 36-37), women gave a political meaning to home. The boundary between public and private spheres as well as the border between men's places and women's places became blurred. These experiences allowed women to gain new talents, to become aware of their capacities, and to prove they could do man's jobs. Results like these resonate well with the demands and wishes of First Wave Feminists. For example, Thebaud explains that one out of four of workers in defense industry were women. She added that when the responsibility to mobilize women was granted to General Groener in 1916 in Germany, feminists protested this decision strongly (Thebaud, 39). They defended the idea that they should be responsible for mobilization of women workers. Moreover, they offered new policy solutions regarding the occupational safety for women workers. To this aim, women established *Frauenarbeits* (FAZ), in which they could particularly take part in debates about politics, economics, social conditions of women, and mothers. This organization was something that liberal feminists had always dreamed about before the war broke out. This experience in Germany illustrates that even without acquiring voting rights women could shape the law, make decisions about themselves, and take control of their lives. Britain sets an excellent example in this regard, because it was the first country that founded Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1917. For the Corp, Pankhursts (a famous feminist group) worked hard to reassure authorities who were worried about the confusion in the gender values. The commander of this corp. was a woman, Watson.

Feminists' written sources mention that there were many upper and middle class women among women serving in the army during the wartime. If we consider the attacks on Wollstonecraft, Grimke, Stanton, and Taylor about the ideal norms of middle class women such as cleanness, beauty, being far from dirtiness, blood and, chaos of outside, this information is really challenging. While women were producing missiles, helping the wounded in front lines, by touching blood and the body of men, whom they had never seen before, they crossed the traditional gender boundaries. Also by participating in industries or Red Cross, women across the divides of race and class came together building relationships. That was what feminists always worked towards before the war, protesting the gender system, which took women away from each other (Davidoff 2002). With the women serving their nations during wartime, they began to wear trousers, shorter skirts, loose and relax clothes, which were forbidden or not tolerated socially (Goldstein 2001). They got rid of long dresses which added weight to various parts of their body (Enloe 2000). Their bodies became free again. This was a subversive act, which shook the middle class femininity codes severely.

To be sure, the war was not an amusing experience. It was an extremely difficult period for women, for men, and for everybody. However, when the war ended, many women were forced to return their home in England, Australia, France, and attempts were made to hand over their social and economic power to men again. Despite these efforts, which restored the gender status quo in Europe, women's contributions to women's lives should not be ignored. For example, governments did not open the doors of prestigious

schools to women simply as a gift for their faithfulness to their national identity. Women had to struggle a lot to persuade governments to admit women to the most respected and prominent higher education institutions like Sorbonne and Oxford Universities (Millet, 1980). Women struggled quite hard to become teachers, nurses, and soldiers. Teaching is now generally regarded as a feminized job; thus it is always criticized by feminists. However, during the war, women concerted their efforts to gain entry to teaching jobs, which excluded women back then. The ratio of unmarried relations increased in France, England. Nancy Coat reports that the fertility rates dwindled during the war with the average number of children by white women had decreasing by half (from 7 to 3.5) (Coat, 2005). Women also invented various contraceptive methods. Margaret Sanger, an advocate of birth control in 1910s, declared that in 1920's she took almost 1 million letters from mothers who wanted to learn those methods. Contrary to Victorian moral codes, giving birth began to lose its popularity (Coat, 2005). And because of the war, the population had decreased, so governments, like France, were in need of human resources. They began to encourage women to give birth. Most of the women were persuaded, and this was one of the changes, which was most criticized by the second wave feminists. Although, it is true that women after the war willingly took up the re-gendered roles, reading this experience only from this angle prevents us seeing the real impact of women's choices. Some women, for example, asked for nursing rooms for their babies at workplace, thereby breaking the masculine structure of the workplace. It was the most suitable time for a demand like this. Before the war, those demands voiced by women worker's unions were rejected in France. But this time they managed to have workplaces open nursing rooms in factories. With Engerand Law passed in 1917, women's working conditions improved. It was a time when women did not have the right to vote, but they were able to draft a law protecting their interests.

Davidoff's approach should be remembered here again. In this case, the traditional meaning of private and public became blurred. An act defined as a private activity, like nursing a baby, started to be practiced in the public sphere. Nursing in public was a practice that challenged the socially accepted meaning of the "*public*" in the war times in Europe.

Conclusion

Thébaud quoting from the works of women writers of the war time, like Harriot Stanton Blatch and Sandra Gilbert, states that women serving to the nation were depicted as "sharp, smart and talented" in the literature. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote her utopian book *Herland* in those years. It was this atmosphere served as a source of an inspiration for her. These new images replaced the old ones, such as modest and unhappy woman (Thebaud 41-45). This kind of a new image was a second shock (the first one is the war of course) for the European society. So, as Thebaud said, the dominant feeling among men was "fear": Fear to lose their power, to lose their superior position, to be looked down by women. "New Women" image disturbed men seriously. Then of course French, British and German men started to look for remedies to guarantee their privileged social positions. The attacks on women who were serving during the war came from every field. One of them was the agreement among husbands, unions, and employers on the restriction of women's employment. They came together to find a solution to crumbling authority of men, although

they hardly reached an agreement on which jobs should be feminized temporarily during wartime. In the end, men were returned their jobs after the war. Women workers, especially the women employed in military industries, where the salaries and opportunities were the highest, were dismissed first. In Britain and Germany, these women were offered reparations for their dismissal, unless they admitted the jobs conventionally typed as female jobs like domestic service (Thebaud, 51). As Thébaud underlined, women not accepting this conditions did not get reparations either. Also, Women's Committee, founded in 1916, attempted to convince women to take part in "harmless" and "feminine" activities like food wastage campaigns. On the other hand, as mentioned above, unions, and employers were involved in fierce debates sex-typing of the jobs. Thanks to their talents, such as having an eye for details and nimble fingers, women and their acquired skills had been discovered by employers. As a result, the agreement among husbands, employers, and unions did not exclude the employment of women entirely, since the new serial production methods were compatible with women's capacities. So in spite of unions' rejections, the number of women workers went on to increase in industries (75). Furthermore, since their servicing gave them the awareness that women had valuable talents, freedom, they, especially the black women, (not many of them of course since war affected them differently due to their social, regional and economic conditions) had a chance to take up domestic work opportunities and to work towards improving the conditions of domestic work (Thebaud 75). In short, women were able to change the economic conditions, contributing to the industrial developments intentionally or unintentionally. They enjoyed their freedom and autonomy, spending their own money for themselves by buying socks, jewelry, and expensive foods. Again, as Thebaud mentioned they discovered their body, free movement of their bodies, as they got rid of long and heavy dresses, as well as big hats. Now, they could excel nearly in all sports, could go out at nights alone, could have a dinner alone or with their female friends, could study together with men at school. So when taking an atmosphere like this into consideration, the launch of campaigns to devalue women in some European countries may be understandable (77). For example in Germany, a famous doctor Avon Moll accused women of leading society into perversity. Charges like that implied that with the women undertaking men's role, societies would end up in a state of moral anarchy. Moreover, magazines, newspapers and comics humiliated and ridiculed women (At this point, the fact that there were also magazines, newspapers praising their services, during the war time should not be ignored). Women were labeled as immoral in films and novels. *The Bachelor Girl* of Victor Margueritte in 1922 was one of them (1972). Even those magazines and newspapers that were defining their deeds as success had made an effort to emphasize their femininity. It was femininity, not tarnished just because women were employed in masculine jobs, or were engaged in activities and places associated with masculinity. The press advertised the ability to protect the femininity as women's achievement so that women's employment in masculine jobs could be highlighted once more. For example, an article published in *J'ai vu*, a famous French journal, wrote about the women in military as following: "(...) *You can see them in clothes of men may be, or you can see them while they are producing shell or explosive materials. They did not sacrifice their slenderness and managed to remain women when they are doing the jobs suitable for men*"... (Thebaud 43-44). This moral panic is a sign that something had been transformed in gender relations in bourgeois society in Europe. Surely, the governments made attempts to increase the population during the war and the women's fertility rate

increased. But, during war, women also acquired information on birth control methods, which later became widespread and as Sanger claimed, women continued using these methods after the war as well.

To conclude, there is no doubt that efforts to conserve the gendered norms popular before war, continued, but again there is no doubt that women also continued to struggle against those norms, and their struggle resonated well with the efforts of First Wave Feminists. How this struggle between the feminists had shaped the gendered relations in West during First World War is another topic worth studying.

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