

# Ellen Glasgow's Feminist Outlook Expressed in the *New York Times* Article "No Valid Reason against Giving Votes to Women"

Nino Tsverava

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia  
Email: [ninka.tsverava\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:ninka.tsverava[at]gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Early 20<sup>th</sup> century American writer Ellen Glasgow's feminist outlook is expressed not only in her novels, but also her essays and letters. While in her novels, she illustrates this outlook through life and position of different heroines, in her essays and journalism she does that in philosophical terms. Glasgow's feminist essays set the program which she further develops in her novels. The present work discusses Glasgow's attitude to some problems which arose in 1913 during suffragette parades held in England and dedicated to women suffrage, which drew a wide response in America. The work sets as its purpose to raise and answer the following questions: What is Glasgow's position in regard with suffragette movement and women suffrage as well as associated violence? Where does she see herself in the context of suffragette movement and problems emerged? How does she see the role of her native (Southern) women in terms of the movement? Finally, where in her opinion should suffrage and suffragette movement eventually lead to? The answers to these questions help the reader understand the feminist worldview of the writer at the given stage of her life and career.*

**Keywords:** Ellen Glasgow, suffrage, suffragette, women, outlook

## 1. Background

In April 1909, Glasgow traveled to England. Her brother Frank had just committed suicide, and her sister Cary was mortally ill, so she decided to find refuge in higher ideals, and joined local women suffrage movement, in which she had been involved since the death of her lover Gerald B. London attracted Glasgow because there she wanted to meet the leaders of the movement. One of the first persons she got close to was writer Mary Sinclair, with whom Glasgow shared much in common along with differences, e. g. the family background, where Mary's domineering and Puritan mother was seen as an equivalent to Glasgow's father. Glasgow also met Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the Women's Social and Political Union, actually representing the organization of suffragettes. Working with these and other figures, she took part in the suffrage marches of 1909. Upon her arrival to her home town, she gave the first interview in support of women suffrage, which appeared soon after the Virginia League for Women Suffrage was organized. The basic ideas of this interview are reiterated in the similar interview that she gave to *New York Times* newspaper on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1913, which was entitled as "No Valid Reason against Giving Votes to Women", which states in the headline that, while discussing "English militants and other suffragists" (the interviewer definitely means suffragettes under the former), the famous novelist adds that "even if most women prove unfit to vote, most men are so already" (*NYT*, p.11)<sup>1</sup>. This *New York Times* interview is a programmatic one with regard to the problem of women suffrage, as it discloses Glasgow's outlook on the necessity of granting women the right to vote, while revealing her unique place within this process.

<sup>1</sup> Here and afterwards, unless indicated, the citations are taken from the article "No Valid Reason against Giving Votes to Women", *New York Times*, Vol. VI (March 23, 1913), page 11.

## 1) The Outburst of Suffragette Violence

The main thesis of the opening passages is that although she does not share extremism expressed through militant actions, she would nonetheless not like to condemn suffragists, refusing to think that their actions harmed the movement as some might think. The interviewer uses the term 'suffragists', but obviously, what is meant is 'suffragettes' as understood through the following definition:

Suffragists as those involved in the first wave of the campaign for women's votes. Suffragists believed in peaceful, constitutional campaign methods. In the early 20th century, after the suffragists failed to make significant progress, a new generation of activists emerged. These women became known as the suffragettes, and they were willing to take direct, militant action for the cause. Suffragettes were members of women's organizations in the late - 19th and early - 20th centuries who, under the banner "Votes for Women," fought for women's suffrage, the right to vote in public elections. The term suffragette refers in particular to members of the British Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a women - only movement founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, which engaged in direct action and civil disobedience." (*Office for Women of the Government of South Australia*, 2021)

In response, Glasgow says: "... [T]here are still many people in the world, who think that arguments are settled, and causes are proved, by means of war. My own convictions are against these".

What makes Glasgow bothered by violence is the extreme militancy expressed by English suffragettes in the period from 1909 to 1913. To name but the few,

- On 18 November, 1910, women marched to the House of Parliament, and resorted to the violent action of throwing stones to the windows, wanting to break into the building, which caused the harsh response from the side

of police, who started chasing the demonstrators, catching and imprisoning them. In prison, many suffragettes went on hunger - strike, but were forcedly fed (which became the common practice);

- Encouraged by the W. S. P. U. (led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel), suffragettes employed radical civil disobedience measures. Beside hunger - strikes, they chained themselves to rails, and one of them even threw herself under the king’s horse at the Derby race in 1913;
- In 1912, suffragettes led by Christabel Pankhurst, started the arson campaign. They undertook many successful attempts to burn down houses of prominent citizens, public buildings, and even churches;
- Owing to her radicalism and extremism, Christabel Pankhurst was called “Queen of the Mob”, was sentenced, but escaped to France, and in the years 1912 - 13 directed suffragette activities from Paris, while editing *The Suffragette* edition at the same time. (*British Library, 2021*)

Obviously referring to the above - mentioned and numerous other occasions, Glasgow adds that women will never match men in terms of physical force, and, thus, the sooner they realize and eliminate that, the better; that she does not approve the resolution of the conflict on physical basis.

However, continues Glasgow, her opinion is just an opinion of a single individual, while there are many of those with different opinions and positions, and any “just and righteous cause” should employ numerous different individuals and their endeavor should assume the division of the effort by two halves: those of thought and action. “[T]o achieve the ballot here (in the USA – *Auth.*) and in England we need women who will go into the open and *battle* for their convictions, as well as those who will remain behind to *think* (the italics are ours. – *Auth.*)”.

**2) Ellen Glasgow as a Rebel Thinker**

Glasgow obviously insinuates at her being a thinker, and not a battler, otherwise refraining from judging the suffragettes’ actions. The diagram below shows some differences between Glasgow as a ‘thinker’ and a typical suffragette as a ‘battler’.

Area of comparison	Glasgow	Suffragette
Background	Moderate aristocrat	(Mostly) middle - class radical
Behavior	Lady	Flapper
Occupation	Author	Activist
Goal	Liberation	Suffrage
Area	Literature	Civil rights

The table developed by the author

When Glasgow mentions the need for ‘those behind to think’, she undoubtedly hints at herself. In the course of her life, Ellen Glasgow became exactly a ‘thinker’ and not an ‘activist’. Her mode of ‘thinker’ overcame that of an ‘activist’ basically not from her empirical experience, but that derived from books. However, her rebelliousness is both inherent for her personality as well as acquired from reading books. Her intellectual riot proceeds from her beliefs and written ideas, not being determined by environment. Not

occasionally, she was carried away by philosophic idealism – Kant, Schopenhauer, Berkley, Hume, sharing its thesis on consciousness determining being. Her thoughts and beliefs come from *within*. Even her bitter experience with her father, and alignment with mother, seeming as empirical feminism, actually comes from her inside. And the core beliefs coming from her ‘within’ matched with the ideas of other thinkers – Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and so on. Ellen Glasgow is not a battler, she is a thinker, and that is what makes her different from suffragettes in terms of her actions.

In the next passage she adds that she is inspired by indulgence (“leniency”) towards the militancy by some prominent women she personally knows, who were “in it and of it”. She argues: possessing exceptional insight and brilliance of mind “these women will surely be able to judge of militancy better than I, who am so far away”. Referring to better authorities, experienced in the struggle, Glasgow actually allies with militancy, thus reaffirming her rebellious nature. She is rebellious as she has been so since her early childhood (“I was born with the appreciation of the best, and an equal aversion of the second best. I was, even at that age, a social rebel. I cannot recall the time when the pattern of society, as well as the scheme of thing in general, had not seem to me false and even malignant. ” – *The Woman Within*, p.42), which led her to reading John Stuart Mill, after which she became “an ardent suffragist” (*Ibid.*, p.42).

Further, Glasgow mentions that she is especially worried with gender antagonism, the division between men and women the suffrage movement caused in general. She notes though that when the position of suffragists (that is, suffragettes) will be understood by society as a message of sensible people, the men will grant women the right to vote. “Of course, there always be a sprinkling of reactionaries who will die in the belief that women at the polls will mean ruination to the country: but they are in a minority”, she adds. Here there is a reference to the well - known idea expressed back in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, stating that over - sensibility of certain women leads to the misleading opinion that women in general cannot think rationally, not being able to judge the situation sensibly. Demonization of women as irrational, over - sensitive creatures leads to misconception that they are incapable of sound voting. However, such a demonization is irrational itself. “Opposition to suffrage, in this country at least is all emotional”, Glasgow notes. “In fact, there is not a single valid reason that I have ever heard against giving votes to women”, states she the main thesis of her interview, and explains it further by a supportive idea that if the majority of women are unfit to vote, then so the majority of men are as well. In her words, any argument which really impairs the claims of women for suffrage, “applies equally to men’s rights to it, and therefore to the very form of government itself”. Being a great admirer of John Stuart Mill, whom she read avidly since her early age before converting to Fabian Socialism, she bases her opinion on his arguments. Chapter III of Mill’s feminist work *The Subjection of Women* (1869), deals specifically with women’s suffrage. Having analyzed different factors leading to misperception of women as socially incapable creatures, Mill provides a counter - argument for reasons ostensibly making women bad voters.

Women are accepted to work at public offices, he says. In this sense, these women are seen as men’s equal. At the same time, a public office excludes any unfit man, just as it does to any unfit woman. So why should we impair woman’s right to vote if a woman is allowed for civil service, on the one hand, and, on the other, if a man can be seen unfit for an office just like a woman, why the former have an advantage over the latter in terms of voting? “As long as we are living under a representative form of government, in which the final word is supposed to come from the whole people, we must accept that word when it comes and abide by it”, says Glasgow. In her words, depriving women the right to vote undermines the essence of democracy, as she views her essentially as democrat. Comparing the times of monarchy, when women were a priori considered as second - rate creatures, to the times of democracy, Glasgow mentions that if democracy is still an experiment questioning the viability of some ideas, in particular, those entitling women to vote, then monarchy is a failure – hence, the opinion confining woman in the area of decision - making is wrong. Of course, here Glasgow juxtaposes the conservative England to the progressive England, aligning with the latter, hinting that the actions of suffragists were caused by undemocratic practices of the state and expressing the belief that these practices will be overcome: “...I am an evolutionist, once and for all, and I believe that we are constantly and inevitably growing into better conditions, better states of minds, better possibilities”.

**3) The Role of Southern Women in the Processes**

Ellen Glasgow’s southern background is another cornerstone of her outlook expressed in the article. According to Glasgow, the suffrage movement is considerable in the South in spite of the inherent Southern conservatism, and she provides explanation for that. “As a matter of fact, the women of the South are more fitted for the ballot than any other American women...”, says Glasgow. The reason for that, she believes, is that both before and after the Civil War the women of the South had enormous responsibility in the management of their households and they had to deal with the amount of work “which today would appall the great majority of women”. This enormous sense of responsibility makes the Southern woman “less appalled at the gravity of the gravity of being allowed to vote, and of helping to govern”. Such an acute sense of responsibility leads to extreme self - reliance coming in the post - bellum conditions. The responsibility blended with self - reliance emerging in the household confinement, makes the Southern woman in a way unprepared to make her own living, empowering her at the same time, to educate others to fight for their rights. After the War and the Reconstruction, many southern young women even happened to neglect the traditional values associated with woman, such as sewing, cooking, and conducting a house, leaving for themselves the right to educate others, to teach them the right way. “I have often heard... that teaching was the sole occupation of the Southern women”, says Glasgow and concludes: “Although [the Southern woman] is still conservative and prone to suspend her judgments, she belongs to the finest type of suffragist in this country”.

This mission of the Southern woman to bring educate and enlighten her peer friends is well - expressed in Glasgow’s

*The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909). Here Glasgow brings forward the hostility between sexes originating from patronizing attitudes of males. This ‘sex hatred’ is expressed for the first time in *The Miller of the Old Church*. However, if in earlier works, the historical figures of strong women served as examples and inspiration for present generations, *The Romance of a Plain Man* portrays a new type of woman, a member of the present generation herself, who is called to inspire and educate other women. Women of one generation can teach their younger friends and help them rewrite their mother’s stories turning those into more successful plots. Making positive use of the old tradition, instead of negative one, directed at women’s integration rather than isolation, the traditional ‘history’ becomes possible to be converted into ‘herstory’ (Matthews, 1994).

The unique role of the Southern woman described by Glasgow leads us to the conclusion that the woman of the South actually represents more the type of suffragist than of suffragette. Indeed, in the struggle for women’s rights, both methods and aims of Southern ladies match those of the former. The first women’s suffrage organization in the South – *Southern States Women Suffrage Conference* – established in 1906 even did not strive for the constitutional amendment, fearing the ostensible danger from the black women voters. *The Equal Suffrage League of Virginia*, whose member and co - founder Ellen Glasgow was from 1909, set as its mission the very issue of educating women. The founders and members neglected the necessity of any socially radical actions, such as lobbying the government – this philosophy fit perfectly a responsible, self - reliant, but still family - bound Southern woman, described by Glasgow. In contrast, Washington D. C. - based *Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage*, founded in March 1913 – the time Glasgow published her programmatic interview in *Times* – applied radical methods of struggle, the key of which was lobbying. On March 3, 1913 – 20 days before Glasgow’s interview appeared in *Times* – C. U. W. S. held the first suffrage parade in Washington D. C., a suffragette event Glasgow could not overlook, especially at the background of the events taking place in Britain. *The Equal Suffrage League* was not very friendly to suffragette philosophy confessed by C. U. W. S. and its later outgrowth, *National Woman’s Party*, also active in Virginia since 1916 (Colvard, 2009).

**Suffragist and Suffragette Organizations and the South (the Timeline)**

Date	Suffragists	Suffragettes
1890 1892	National American Women Suffrage Association <i>Elizabeth Cady Stanton</i> <i>Susan B. Anthony</i>	
1906	Southern States Woman Suffrage Conference <i>Kate Gordon,</i> <i>Laura Clay</i>	
1909	Equal Suffrage League of	



		Virginia Lila M. Valentine, Kate W. Barrett, Ellen Glasgow	
Ellen Glasgow's article			Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage
<i>No Valid Reason</i>	March, 1913		<i>Alice Paul, Lucy Burns</i>
March 23, 1913			<i>Woman Suffrage Procession</i>  (the first suffrage parade in America) Washington, D. C., 3 March, 1913
<i>New York Times</i>			
	1916		National Woman's Party <i>Alice Paul</i>
	1920	The 19 <sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution	

The table developed by the author

In the true spirit of traditional culture, the Southern culture always appreciated educated women. When Glasgow speaks about the mission of the Southern woman to educate other women, she remains faithful to the tradition in which she grew and was brought up. In *The Romance of a Plain Man*, Miss Matoaca Bland, the aunt of the bride of protagonist Ben Starr, typifies a woman of such a background and purpose. Trying to prevent Sally from engaging with Ben Starr, 'the plain man', she allies with her sister Mitty, the latter saying to Ben literally: "Why, your father – I beg your pardon for reminding you of it – your father was not even an educated man." (*RPM*, Chapter XVI). High manners, nobility, and dignity – all these are the qualities the Southern women expect from Sally's bridegroom in good old Southern traditions. Of course, all these come from proper education, and Miss Matoaca is the very one called to educate her peers. She distributes pamphlets on women's emancipation. Liberation through proper principles – that is her creed, and she places principles over emotions. Ben questions her viability though, asking how she could understand with her mind a single idea, or how could she emancipate women when her principles go in line with her Southern values. At the same time, Matoaca is rebellious. She actually sacrifices her life to the struggle for women's equality, dying after marching in a suffrage parade. Matoaca challenges the traditions of old patriarchy entering in conflict with General Bolingbroke, whose protégé Starr is. Being rebellious and Southern at the same time, she offers a unique model of resistance to traditional gender values, mentioned by Glasgow. "Miss Matoaca... worked for the emancipation of women, while she herself was the slave of an ancestry of men who oppressed women, and women who loved oppression!" Ben says (*RPM*, Chapter XVI).

4) Glasgow's Outlook: Beyond Suffrage

The final part of the interview highlights Glasgow's actual outlook. Glasgow notes that, although being the main topic of discussion, much more noteworthy than suffrage is the feminist movement in general. Thus, Glasgow actually moves from the narrower topic of suffrage to the broader theme of women liberation, which becomes the subject of her another *New York Times* article ("Feminism"). "I think that the ballot itself is a very small and unimportant factor in the whole movement to emancipate women, and I imagine that many, many women agree with me. It is the splendid growth of the whole world in its attitude towards women that is the beauty and the glory of our century", she says, continuing that for centuries women have been refused the opportunity to develop, which is ironical considering that even the smallest and inanimate things underwent development. Therefore, women should help themselves and that can be achievable through their cooperation. Women never backed each other yet, and it is time to stand with each other shoulder to shoulder. Glasgow refers to the experience of Southern women. The only prospect that the latter have is raising children. That generally lasts for about 20 years, involving hard work, after which a woman is so much exhausted and devastated that she is not capable of doing anything else. And if she does not manage to get married, that is even worse. Her mind, being active for a while, gradually degenerates, she loses interest in anything deprived of any activities stimulating energy, and causes apathy. Such an existence is truly miserable, but luckily there have recently appeared glimpses of hope. And this hope is grounded on the willingness to cooperate: "The point of value is that we have realized our plight and have set ourselves to abolish it, and that we have stumbled on the important truth that cooperation is strength" (*Ibid.*). Men have always been sarcastic towards women regarding their passivity to help each other, but the times are changing. Owing to the feminist movement, women are not only losing many old personal prejudices, but also wiping out class distinctions and class prejudices. Socially active women, high social status, who are ready to help other women, is becoming common.

Glasgow makes a reservation though that, calling for equal opportunity, she does not want women to become like men – for this women and men are too different, but she rejoices that women are finally shaking off their chains to receive their just and honest privileges. At the same time, women always stand "at the portals of birth and death" and when they go for their education and work, they will carry with them "a depth and intensity of feeling that few men ever attain to" (*Ibid.*).

At the end of the article, Glasgow refers to men who speak about evil, reckoning that however deplorable it may be, it is still inevitable. She says that no woman will put up with that anymore. "She would fight it out, and win, on the basis that anything which is really evil is not necessary – cannot be – and that anything that is really necessary cannot, and is not, evil", she ends.

## 2. Conclusion

Outburst of suffragette violence in England in 1909 - 1913 drew a wide response in the American society. Ellen Glasgow's position with regard to the problem, expressed on the Pages of *New York Times* covered a number of issues, which allows us of the following conclusions:

- 1) Glasgow herself condemns the extreme violence of suffragettes. Expressing the overall support of the cause, she, nevertheless, believes that women will not match men in physical force, hence the violent method of struggle is inappropriate;
- 2) Being critical of mentioned outward methods of suffragettes, Glasgow still finds conceivable that she is not the best judge of the cases, and there are ladies of better level of judgment than hers. Justifying her position as that of a thinker, she nonetheless underlines that she is a rebel thinker, as has always been since her childhood. Thus, Glasgow is sympathetic towards the suffragettes regardless of the methods they employ;
- 3) Glasgow attributes special role in suffrage movement to the women of South. Explaining that, although they have been confined to conventional modes of living because of the traditional mode of society in the South, she still considers a Southern woman to possess rare merits proceeding from her upbringing, background, and education. In Glasgow's opinion, Southern women are called to educate their counterparts, and considers the increasing of awareness among women as their mission;
- 4) Speaking of suffragette parades and women issues, Glasgow goes beyond mere suffrage movement. In her opinion, struggle for legal rights is just a part of the wider movement for women's right, which should be promoted through better cooperation among women to be directed towards their emancipation. Later Ellen Glasgow would specify her outlook further in her following *New York Times* article "Feminism".

- [8] Wollstonecraft, M. (1997). *The Vindications: The Rights of Men and The Rights of Woman*. Eds. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf. Toronto: Broadview Literary Texts.

### Internet Sources

- [9] *British Library* (2021). <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/suffragettes-violence-and-militancy> Retrieved 25.04.2021
- [10] *Office for Women of the Government of South Australia* (2021) <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/125th-anniversary-of-suffrage/suffragistsuffragette-whats-the-difference> Retrieved 04.05.2021

## References

### Primary Sources

- [1] Glasgow, E. (1913). "Feminism". *New York Times* (November, 30, 1913), p.656 - 657.
- [2] Glasgow, E. (1913). "No Valid Reason against Giving Votes to Women", *New York Times*, Vol. VI (March 23, 1913), p.11.
- [3] Glasgow, E. (1980). *The Woman Within*. New York: Hill and Wang. Retrieved from the Internet Archive.
- [4] Glasgow, E. (1909). *The Romance of a Plain Man*. New York: The MacMillan Company. Retrieved from the Internet Archive.

### Secondary Sources

- [5] Colvard, B. (2009). *Virginia Women & The Vote, 1909 - 2009: The Equal Suffrage League & The League of Women Voters in Virginia*. The League of Women Voters of Virginia Education Fund.
- [6] Matthews, P. R. (1994). *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia.
- [7] Mill, J. S. (1869). *The Subjection of Women*. Project Gutenberg. Release date: October 28, 2008.