

Comparative Women's Rights and Political Participation in Europe, by Gisbert H. Flanz

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III. COMPARATIVE LAW

COMPARATIVE WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE. By Gisbert H. Flanz. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Transnational Publishers, Inc., 1983, 520 pp., \$45.00.

World-wide interest in women's studies has been steadily increasing over the past decade. In the United States more and more colleges are offering courses and degrees in women's studies. As a result, the literature available on women's studies has grown tremendously. Today there is an abundance of writings on such subjects as rape, pornography, employment and education opportunities, childbearing and marriage. Harvard Law School now publishes a journal which is dedicated solely to women's issues.

One area of women's studies which has not benefitted from the recent surge of writing is comparative women's rights. Even when such works have appeared, their access has often been restricted by the lack of an English translation. The purpose of Gisbert Flanz's *Comparative Women's Rights and Political Participation in Europe* is to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive account of the current legal status of women in each of the thirty-four countries of Europe. In addition, the work seeks to provide its readers with access to previously difficult to obtain statutes and references through the inclusion of a lengthy appendix and a bibliography.

Professor Flanz is particularly qualified to write such a book. Born in Czechoslovakia and trained in that country as a lawyer, he came to the United States in 1939 and earned a Ph.D. in Politics at Princeton. For thirty-six years he was a Professor of Political Theory and Comparative Politics at New York University. Beginning in 1954, he taught as a visiting professor in several countries. His knowledge of many foreign languages made it possible for him to study numerous works on women's rights before preparing the current work.

The book is divided in two ways. First, it is separated into three major time periods: pre-1918, 1918 to 1945, and post-1945. Within these three groupings the work categorizes the countries of Europe into four geographical sub-groups: the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden); Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland and West Germany); the Southern and Mediterranean countries (Andorra, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Monaco, Portugal, San Marino, Spain and Turkey); and Eastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia).

The country-by-country evaluations are followed by several concluding chapters which describe the work and accomplishments of the United Na-

tions and other international organizations through 1982. The closing chapter consists of an interim assessment of the achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85). An extensive appendix of more than one-hundred pages reprints the text of recent governmental statutes, decrees and resolutions which cover twenty-one separate subjects. A selective bibliography of both English and foreign language works on women's rights and participation in European political systems and a brief index complete the book's 520 pages.

Users of this work—for the book will probably be used more as a reference guide than as either a teaching tool or popular reading—will find that they are simultaneously grateful and dismayed by the attempted breadth and scope of the author's study. To the book's credit, it brings together for the first time pieces of historical and contemporary information which previously were either unavailable or inaccessible. It also provides the user with information on many of the smaller nations of Europe, such as Liechtenstein and San Marino, whose histories of feminine political participation have not been recorded. The book's bibliography is a particularly strong feature of the book. Painstakingly compiled and containing many works which have only recently become available in English translations, the bibliography is done an injustice by its compilers by being called selective. This is an excellent bibliography, and one which has been needed for a very long time.

The book has substantive and stylistic flaws, however, and they will keep it from achieving a wider readership. First, the book is not for readers who lack an extensive understanding of European history and a firm grasp on women's issues. Because the author has decided to include an account of each country on the continent, he has not provided a general discussion of European history or women's issues. Although an excellent set of Introductory Notes does attempt to provide the reader with at least a few historical benchmarks so as not to be totally lost, these Notes only skim the deeper political, economic and social forces which have shaped the status and determined the place of European women. Indeed, the author reminds us at various points throughout the text that all that can be attempted in the relatively brief space of a single volume is to identify specific historical facts and draw brief conclusions from those facts.

A second substantive problem with the work which will limit its appeal for the serious reader is that it is too cursory to be of more than passing interest. The 330 or so pages of text must cover more than thirty countries over a period of centuries. As such, a country's entire history must be covered in less than a dozen pages. The author has recognized the problem and has tried to compensate by providing longer pieces on national development after World War II and by limiting the treatment of smaller countries so as to have more space to devote to such countries as England and France.

Despite these efforts, the result is a work which can do no more than identify major trends and recount significant historical events.

Besides being too weighty for the casual reader and too light for the serious one, a third substantive flaw of the book is that it is quickly becoming a period piece. Written in the early 1980s and published in 1983, the book is already several years out of date and falls further behind with each passing day. The previously mentioned United Nations Decade for Women, for example, is now in its final year. Thus, while the work describes itself in its preface as a comparative study of the *contemporary* status of women in Europe, the *contemporary* must be understood as referring to pre-1983. This is not to say that such a work is not useful; rather, the reader must simply understand the fact that because of its hardbound form, the book is and will continue to become outdated.

With respect to the style, one aspect of the book which will undoubtedly draw widespread and unrelenting criticism from its users will be its organization. It would be hard to design a book more difficult to work with than the present one. The problems stem, initially, from the decision to divide the book chronologically and geographically. The difficulty with this dual division can best be illustrated with an example. A user who is interested in one country, say Finland, must flip through the book to find the pre-1918, 1918-45, and post-1945 discussions of female political participation in Finland. These treatments appear beginning on pages 13, 68 and 121. What is particularly irritating is the fact that neither the Table of Contents nor the Index list Finland, forcing one to work through the entire text in order to locate the desired selections. Even after one has located the three chronological treatments, one must still do some further flipping of pages. First, the user must consult the Table of Contents to determine whether any of Finland's legislation has been reproduced in the statutory appendix and, if so, where. Finland's appendix begins on page 338. Next one must turn to the bibliography to find out whether any works are listed for Finland. There are, and they appear on page 486. By now the need to read the book with *both* hands should be apparent. In a further quirk of editing which will most assuredly send the reader into fits, the bibliography is listed by country in alphabetical order, without regard to the geographical divisions made in the text.

A much improved editorial style would have been to treat each country fully before moving forward to the next one. Thus, each country would have been given its own section which would have comprised all three chronological treatments, followed by the relevant statutory language that appears in the appendix and that part of the bibliography which concerns itself with the country. This suggested organization has several advantages. First, a user interested in a particular country would have easy and speedy access to that country. Second, a reader intent upon reading the entire book would be

able to focus his or her thoughts on one country at a time. As currently designed, the reader must constantly return to the last "installment" before reading the next historical treatment of a given country. By the time one has reached page 121 and is ready to read about developments in Finland after World War II, it has been more than fifty pages (and twenty-four countries) since one last read about Finland. Of course, the lack of a satisfactory table of contents means that a reader who wishes to jump ahead and read the next installment of a particular country must hunt through the succeeding pages in order to find the subsequent treatment of the country he or she is interested in.

The basis for the decision to divide the book along chronological and geographical lines, although only partially explained by the author, appears to have been a desire to show how changes in national thinking and practice have been affected by transnational and cross-boundary events and movements. Because of the limited space in which countries are treated, however, only a word or two is said in many instances with regards to how a particular country's laws and practice have been affected by events taking place beyond its borders. In order to provide an increased perspective, the author has included short introductions before each chapter. Like the Introductory Notes, however, these brief chapter introductions can do no more than rescue a reader who has lost his or her way and is in need of help to sort out historical events and places.

A further stylistic problem with the book is that the author's writing tends to be rather dry. This is not from any lack of skill, however, for the Introductory Notes include some of the liveliest and most insightful reading that this reviewer has had the opportunity to enjoy. Rather, because the author has much to say and not enough space to say it in, the author's considerable knowledge of the subject and lively writing style have been forced to give way to a dull prose filled with facts, dates and numbers. Such writing, appropriate for reference works and the mark of unimaginative writers, is to be particularly mourned in light of the fascinating and colorful subject with which the book is concerned and the gifted writing which the author is so clearly able to produce when allowed the opportunity.

What, then, is to be said for *Comparative Women's Rights and Political Participation in Europe*? It is a large and extensive book which deserves to be read, but which will probably find itself usually reposing on the library shelf. This fate could have been avoided by limiting the scope of the work and making better editing choices.

Hopefully, this book will be revised and reissued. If it is, the new version should incorporate the stylistic changes suggested herein. It should also be issued in two volumes, with one volume on individual countries, and the other on international and regional organizations, since the current work does not spend enough time on such organizations and will have to be ex-

tensively updated to cover the United Nations Decade for Women. Finally, and most importantly, the work should be issued in looseleaf form and regular updates should be made available. Such periodic updating would make this one of the most important works in the constantly growing library of women's studies.

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