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The 'Emancipated Ladies' of America in the Travel Writing of Fredrika Bremer and Alexandra Gripenberg¹

By Sirpa Salenius²

Abstract

The Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865) and the Finnish Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg (1857-1913), both active women's rights advocates who toured in the United States in the 1850s and 1880s, respectively, used their travel writing as a powerful medium in promoting their ideological agendas. They articulated their gender politics through presenting American women as pioneers, leaders in women's suffrage and models of female emancipation. Women's activism in America was perceptible not only in the formally organized women's rights movement but also in various reform movements (abolitionism, temperance, and labor movements) that contributed to women's suffrage on a worldwide scale. As the century progressed, the women's rights movement grew into an international collaboration of people and associations dedicated to a common cause. The travel writing of Bremer and Gripenberg offers a view of the century plagued by anxieties about gender, while it serves to advance the writer's ideological beliefs. Thus, in addition to using fictional works and journalism to advance women's causes, Bremer and Gripenberg instrumentalized their travels as they addressed their audience of like-minded women in their own countries—as well as abroad—informing, influencing, and empowering them. Indeed, as scholar Jennifer Steadman suggests, “representations of female travellers, like their travel texts, were gaining larger audience and were therefore impacting cultural ideas about women, travel, national identity, and citizenship” (60). It can be argued that following the model set by the “emancipated ladies” of America,¹ women's rights advocates in Europe, like Bremer and Gripenberg, together with international women's associations whose concern was women's strive for independence, contributed to a universal suffrage reform in such countries as Finland, leading women towards inclusion in full citizenship.

Keywords: multidisciplinary, travel writing, women's emancipation, transatlantic women, Finland

“I saw several of the ‘emancipated ladies,’ as they are called; such, for instance, as deliver public lectures, speak in public at anti-slavery meetings, etc. One of

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these struck me from the picturesque beauty of her figure and head, her pale noble countenance and rich golden hair, together with the perfect gentleness and womanliness of her whole demeanor and conversation, united to manly force of will and conviction.” (Bremer 1:144)

The Swedish novelist and women’s rights advocate, Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865), wrote this passage from Boston in January 1850, during her tour of antebellum America. Nineteenth-century American women—female activists and leaders of various American organizations dedicated to furthering women’s rights—were of great interest to her, and subsequently, nearly forty years later, to the Finnish Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg (1857-1913). In the course of their extensive American tours, both Nordic writers met many local women whose lives were dedicated to advancing women’s rights within women’s suffrage, abolition, and temperance movements. Both Bremer and Gripenberg used their travel writing as a powerful medium in promoting their ideological agendas. Thus, in addition to using fictional works, journalism, and personal correspondence to advance women’s emancipation, they instrumentalized their travels as they addressed their audience of like-minded women in their own countries—as well as abroad—informing, influencing, and empowering them. They articulated their gender politics through presenting American women as models of emancipated female leaders. As scholar Jennifer Steadman suggests, “representations of female travellers, like their travel texts, were gaining larger audience and were therefore impacting cultural ideas about women, travel, national identity, and citizenship” (60). In Bremer’s travel letters, published in 1853, America—or the New World—is presented as taking the first steps towards improving educational and career opportunities for women, whereas Gripenberg’s travel book from 1889 introduces women who already were accomplished professionals, held leadership positions and were internationally involved in organized women’s associations. The relative freedom American women seemed to enjoy, and their role as the leading advocates of women’s rights, stimulated Bremer and Gripenberg to make efforts to introduce changes in the Nordic countries in women’s education and career opportunities, find ways to instigate changes in laws that restricted women’s liberty to marry or handle their own property, and to offer women progressive role models. The “emancipated ladies” of America inspired Bremer and Gripenberg so that upon their return home they continued working for furthering women’s cause not only in their own countries but also internationally. Indeed, the efforts of many women in America, their international networking activities, and the political impact of international women’s organizations all significantly contributed to the worldwide struggle for obtaining equal rights for women in various countries, including Finland, where both Bremer and Gripenberg were born.

Fredrika Bremer—an international pioneer in women’s emancipation

Bremer, who was born in 1801 into an affluent Swedish-speaking family living in Tuorla Mansion outside Turku (Finland), was dedicated to women’s cause already before her American tour. In 1804, the family moved to Sweden proper, where Bremer started her writing career in 1828. Her first novel, *Sketches of Every-day Life*, was followed by other fictional works that depicted Swedish middle and upper class life. With her writings, in which women characters figure prominently, Bremer made an ample fortune that she mostly devoted to charities, especially those committed to improving the condition of less fortunate women. In many of her novels—quite often deemed controversial—that furthered women’s rights movement in the

Nordic countries Bremer addressed problems concerning contemporary women. Her novels were translated into several languages, and her fame rapidly spread through Europe and America. As Mary Howitt, her translator, wrote in an article published in the *New York Times* on 14 March 1886, editions of her translated works “ran like wildfire through the United States.” Hence, she had already addressed the issue of and demonstrated her concern for women’s rights, to some extent, in her fictional works prior to introducing American women in her travel writing as models for women’s emancipation.

Bremer’s two-year American tour, which she organized and financed by herself, took place in 1849-51. Although she travelled alone, she had received numerous invitations from prominent Americans who had read her works and wished to offer her their hospitality. Upon her arrival in the East Coast, such notable figures as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson entertained her with dinners where they discussed slavery, literature, and the situation of women. In her letters, Bremer meticulously reported her conversations with the leading intellectuals, often including passages of their writings to accompany her comments.

Her observations on American culture and society appeared in the letters written to her sister Agatha, which Bremer prepared for publication in book form after her return to Sweden. The original volume in Swedish, *Hemmen i den nya verlden*, was simultaneously translated into English. *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* appeared in 1853. In New York alone, the book went through five printings in a month. The travel letters were an invaluable testimony of antebellum America and its political, social, and cultural modes.¹ In the letters Bremer reported on American school systems, shared her views on lady’s academies, and commented on slavery and the accelerating political tension between Northern and Southern states. However, she particularly wanted to learn about the situation of women in the contemporary New World society. As she stated at the beginning of her travel narrative, the purpose of her visit to the United States was,

to breathe a new and fresher atmosphere of life; to observe the popular life, institutions, and circumstances of a new country; to become clearer in my own mind on certain questions connected with the development of nations and people; and, in particular, to study the women and the homes of the New World. (1:53)

Her expectations regarding the situation of women in America were highly idealised. The new concepts of womanhood, gender politics and racial equality were pivotal in Bremer’s idealistic projections of the future development of humanity. Since she considered many strong women central to this development, her letters described American women’s behaviour, discussed their options for education and careers, and introduced some institutions that had been created specifically for treating marginalized women in America. For instance, the institutions she visited during her tour included a house of correction for women (Bremer 1:148), a prison for women, an orphan asylum for girls (Bremer 2:210-11), factories where poor women worked (Bremer 1:210-11), and a visit to a home for “fallen women” where the novelist Catherine Sedgwick was one of the managers (Bremer 1:69).

Sedgwick, who was sympathetic to women’s rights and abolition, and whose conversation and personality Bremer found pleasant, had met the Swedish novelist soon after her landing in the United States and had invited her for a visit to her home in Lenox, thus providing Bremer a possibility to exchange ideas with another forward-looking woman. As Bremer wrote:

I spent a four-and-twenty hours with the excellent and admirable Catharine Sedgwick and her family, enjoying her company and that of several agreeable ladies. There were no gentlemen—gentlemen, indeed, seemed to be rare in social circles of this neighbourhood. But they were less missed here than is generally the case in society, because the women of this little circle are possessed with intellectual cultivation—several of them endowed with genius and talent of high order. (2:596)

Based on her observations, Bremer constructed images of American life from a female perspective, but her vision of the United States was also influenced by her class, race, national and cultural background. Although she promoted women's emancipation, she also shared many contemporary stereotypes created around the figure of the domestic white women. Indeed, in her letters, many American women still appeared in their traditional roles as wives and caretakers of their homes. The general idea she formed of American white women representing the upper and middle classes was that they, for the most part, were "lovely," "pretty," and "delicate" (Bremer 1:33). She underscored the conventional concept of femininity and physical frailty that was the prevailing construction of womanhood in the time and could be used to justify women's social dependence upon men. According to Bremer, many of the women she met were tied to their domestic environments as representatives of the ideal woman characterized by piety, sexual purity, domesticity, and submissiveness; they were the period's 'True Women.' Thus, for the most part she presented gender in conventional terms, while relying on traditional gender stereotypes.

In addition to the domestic feminine women, Bremer also met some modern women, who could be seen as the first representatives of the 'New Woman' figure that became more prominent in the last decades of the nineteenth century. As scholar Elizabeth Langland argues, as early as in the 1840s, "Victorians were engaged in a significant debate over the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women" (381). Dissatisfied with the immobility of the domestic sphere, the New Woman questioned her role and limitations, eventually challenging them by entering the public domain. Bremer—herself a progressive woman—reserved her highest praise for the educated, professional women she met whose careers had taken them outside the domestic walls. These American women appeared to her as examples of ideal womanhood: she admired them for their strength, talent, and genius that were intertwined with feminine qualities. Thus, despite the active participation in public life, what seemed important to Bremer, similarly to many of her contemporaries, was the continuity of the concept of feminine woman. Indeed, in the time period, domesticity and public activism co-existed in the lives of many women without being regarded as contradictory. Contemporary women could be dedicated to their homes and husbands as well as actively participate in public life. Scholar Karen Offen argues that as late as in 1871, a cautious Danish women's rights advocate still insisted that femininity and marriage must be preserved (148).

At the time of Bremer's visit, some local Conventions for the Rights of Women were being held in New England, where both men and women discussed the civil rights of women. The women's rights movement had organizationally been separated from abolitionism at the Seneca Falls meeting of 1848, where the discussion had shifted from the rights of African Americans to contemplating ways to improve the situation of women. The meeting, which was a result of the efforts of such American activists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott—who had committed themselves to organizing a women's rights convention in the United States

after their participation in the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in June 1840—signalled the beginning of formal, organized women’s emancipation movement in the United States.

The national meetings of local women’s groups were held in 1850 at Salem (Ohio) and Worcester (Massachusetts). Unfortunately, as Bremer regretted, she was unable to attend any of the Women’s Conventions, but based on her personal interaction with local women, she cited the author Caroline Kirkland as an example of “one of the strong women of the country” with a distinct womanliness of heart and soul (1:90). She also heard Lucretia Mott speak about slavery and the rights of women at a Quaker meeting. Bremer admired her for the “talent, power, clearness, light” noticeable in her “excellent” speech (1:427):

With a low, but very sweet voice, and an eloquence of expression which made me not lose a single word, she [Lucretia Mott] spoke for certainly an hour, without interruption, without repetition, and in a manner which made one wish her to continue, so lucid and powerful was her delineation of the principles of non-conformity (the Quaker principles), so logical and excellent was the application of these to the practical questions of life, now so much contested, and which the speaker represented as being peace, slavery, and the rights of woman. I listened with the greatest pleasure to this excellent discourse, which was permeated by the inner life of the speaker as by a strong though somewhat imprisoned fire. [...] I am, in the mean time, glad to have heard a female speaker, perfect in her way. The room was quite full, and she was listened to with evident admiration. (1:427)

These public figures appeared in Bremer’s eyes as strong and bold, yet emanating gentleness, womanliness, will and conviction. She used her travel letters to reformulate womanhood through the example of women activists who were trespassing gender boundaries.

The other progressive women Bremer met during her stay in the United States included the actress Charlotte Cushman, who wrote to Bremer immediately after her arrival in New York. Bremer also met Lydia Maria Child (abolitionist and women’s rights advocate), and the lobbyist Dorothea Dix. In addition, she was enthusiastic about the female doctors she observed during their home visits to treat patients. These women physicians made her realize the importance of women dedicating themselves to the medical profession, especially to taking care of women. One female doctor, as Bremer explained, had been “in practice twelve years as a physician of women and children, acquiring the public confidence, and laying up property (as, for instance, the house in which she lives, a frugally furnished, but excellent house, is her own), and aiding, as I heard from many, great numbers of ladies in sickness, and in diseases peculiar to their sex” (1:142). She understood how significant it was to train women to become doctors, who could take care of other women. As she concluded, “I was really delighted with her, and now for the first time fully saw the importance of women devoting themselves to the medical profession” (1:142). She also met a lady with “a very womanly demeanor, from which nobody could surmise that she reads Greek and Latin, and understands mathematics like any professor.” This woman taught her students “while she shelled peas, and with one foot rocked the cradle of her little grandson” (Bremer 1:171). The professor’s professional occupation, as Bremer presented it, formed an addition to her more traditional tasks of taking care of the home. Thus, as Bremer explained through her various examples, the domestic role of American women did not exclude their taking part in public life. However, the tensions arising from women trying to fulfil the role

of a domestic caretaker as well as to pursue a successful career were evident. For instance, while the sister of the physician was married, the “doctress” was unmarried and had dedicated her life to her work. Often, as Bremer explained, men disapproved of women who wished to take up occupations that traditionally were practised by men, and married women could enter the public domain only if their husbands supported their views and activity (1:144). Hence, the position of women was by no means ideal; instead, it was quite difficult for women to avoid tensions and reconcile their roles in the public and private spheres.

After Bremer had listened to the many lectures given by “splendid” American women, some “particularly zealous on the subject of the development of her sex to a more independent life” (1:432), she claimed to have no reason to doubt the development in America. In her vision, the new ideal of woman—one who was a public as well as domestic figure, an independent professional who continued to take care of her home—presented no threat to the existing social order. Instead, these women were depicted as able to realize their full potential and expand gender boundaries into what was in the time considered men’s domain. In her travel text, Bremer dismantled gender hierarchies by introducing the emerging New Woman who was to dominate the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The ideal woman, in Bremer’s view, could be found in American Quaker communities that followed doctrines based on the equality of men and women. Despite their dedication to their homes, Quaker women actively participated in decision-making and shared the responsibilities of the community life on equal terms with men. Both sexes, Bremer maintained, cherished their differences while working to improve and further develop their potential and capacities (1:424). As Bremer realized,

How little danger there is in this avowed equality, and how little outward change is produced by it in society, the Quaker community has practically shown. Men and women have the same privileges, and exercise them alike. But in all this they have remained true to their nature; she turns rather into the home; he, more outward, to the community. The women have remained equally feminine, but have become more marked in character. The different characteristics of the two have, in that which was the best, remained unchanged, but have been improved, elevated where they were worst. (Bremer 1:424)

In this way, on the one hand she promoted an idea of a universal human being that surpassed gender lines, while on the other hand she recognized gender-specific traits, which in her view should be strengthened. Hence, although men and women shared the same privileges and could be considered equal, women, in Bremer’s understanding, had a natural tendency to take care of the home and enhance their femininity, whereas men were more active participants outside their homes, in the community. In other words, Bremer’s attitude seemed contradictory: she foregrounded egalitarianism, while at the same time underscoring conventional gender definitions. As her response demonstrates, although such ambiguity was considered quite normal at the time of her visit, Bremer seemed to be vacillating between the traditional and progressive gender ideologies.

During her American tour, Bremer visited Niagara Falls which, in her travel letters, she presented as a symbol of her vision of ideal womanhood. Niagara, to her, was “a goddess, calm and majestic even in the exercise of her highest power [...] She has grand, quiet thoughts, and calls forth such in those who are able to understand her” (1:588). The full potential of women,

then, was maximized in this vision that encompassed grandness intertwined with calmness; she portrayed the symbolic woman as a leader, “a goddess” in full control of her thoughts and actions. In a similar way, she interpreted the sculptor Hiram Powers’ statue *Genevra*, also called *American*, as representative of an ideal woman. According to Bremer, this *Genevra* was what an American woman seemed like. The character traits that Bremer assigned to the ideal woman were universally appreciated values: kindness, wisdom, altruism, and honesty. These were attributes Christians cultivated in themselves and others, while regarding them as the high qualities for both men and women.

In Bremer’s vision, women’s potential could be optimized through education. She informed that many American women were already training to become teachers, while they studied subjects that in Sweden were considered incomprehensible for women, including Latin, Greek, mathematics, algebra, and the physical sciences (2:122, footnote). She visited Oberlin College where she was pleased to witness how “colored as well as white people, both boys and girls, studied and took degrees in all those branches of knowledge which were taught in the American academies” (2:165). According to her idealized perception, in Ohio people wished to do justice to all “tendencies of humanity” with unprejudiced minds (2:165). In the face of fierce opposition, Oberlin had taken a firm position for abolition, becoming the first to admit students regardless of race. Indeed, despite the protests that were raised against the college for granting educational rights to African Americans and women, Oberlin’s educational philosophy challenged the concept of ‘separate but equal,’ making it the first co-educational college in the country. In the passage, Bremer evoked an image of a society where education was a right conferred to all, transcending gender and racial boundaries. Despite her conventional ideas concerning feminine women and racial characteristics of African Americans that she shared with the majority, she was an enthusiastic supporter of mixed schools—where boys studied with girls and white students sat next to African Americans—that she witnessed as already being established in the United States. In her view, the position of women with regard to schools was “indubitably one of the most beautiful aspects of the New World” (1:190). As she further explained, “[t]he educational institutions for women are, in general, much superior to those of Europe; and perhaps the most important work which America is doing for the future of humanity consists in her treatment and education of woman” (1:191). In her idealistic view, then, the first steps towards equality between men and women had already been taken in the homes of the New World where the first ‘New Women’ had already been raised.

Upon her return to Sweden, Bremer reinforced her position as one of the central figures in the women’s rights movement in the Nordic countries. As scholar Inger Hammar argues, her “radical message was fuelled by her stay in the United States” (40). Her sister Charlotte wrote in the biography on Fredrika that “on her return from America, it became her favourite idea to work for the entire emancipation of the Swedish woman and her deliverance from the traditional restrictions in her social position.” She especially wished that women should be allowed to study in the elementary schools and academies so that they could find employment. Bremer was convinced, Charlotte wrote, that women should be allowed to prepare themselves in universities to become lecturers, professors, judges, and physicians (81-85). Bremer’s predominating thought became how to secure liberty and unlimited sphere of activity for women in Sweden. She started working on her controversial novel *Hertha* soon after her American tour. As Charlotte explained, Bremer was convinced that it was a great injustice in Swedish legislation not to recognize majority, or being in full legal age, in Swedish women at a certain age nor allow them to be in charge of their own property. Charlotte’s claim, presented in the biography, was confirmed in an

anonymous article published in *Putnam's Monthly* in September 1856, which asserted that the intensity of conviction in *Hertha* was due to the inspiration of the New World where Bremer had witnessed an enthusiasm in the woman's movement.

Scholar Heidi Grönstrand defines *Hertha, or the Story of a Soul* (1856) "a highly political work" (53). Indeed, it was a protest against the existing laws in the Nordic countries that kept women legally dependent on men. In *Hertha*, Bremer not only made direct appeals to Swedish legislators, but she also demonstrated the injustice embedded in the laws affecting women through the example of her protagonist. In the main character, Bremer created an intelligent woman who resembled her vision of American women. However, in the novel the protagonist, Hertha, was paralyzed in her domestic life as the obedient servant of her father, while her desire to obtain education and become independent was repeatedly frustrated, thus making the injustice of existing laws evident. In *Hertha*, Bremer was concerned about women's right to economic and legal independence.

From Bremer to Gripenberg: Four Decades of Change

As the nineteenth-century scholar, W. H. Davenport Adams, points out, the aim of Bremer's novel *Hertha* had been the "reform of the Swedish laws affecting women" (146). In 1859, Swedish legislators passed laws that enabled women to be teachers in primary schools, and in 1861 permitted women to practice surgery and dentistry. The school for female teachers opened in Stockholm in 1861 and during the 1860s several high schools and schools for nurses were founded. In 1863, Swedish legislators changed the law Bremer's novel had objected to: women were unconditionally declared of age at twenty-five. In 1872, women of twenty-five obtained full power to marry without having to attain their father's, brother's or relative's consent, which until then had been necessary. In 1870 women could study at the universities, and in 1873 they could take the same degrees in arts and medicine as male students. Around the 1870s-1880s many philanthropic associations and institutions were founded, including a reformatory for women, a reformatory school for girls, a home for destitute women, and a home for poor elderly women that was endowed by Bremer.²

Bremer was overjoyed about the law that allowed unmarried women to become of age at twenty-five and was equally pleased about the seminary for educating female teachers. In 1854, in addition to working to improve the situation of Swedish women, Bremer proposed a peace alliance of Christian women's associations in various countries, a plan for a Universal Association of Women that was to cover the entire world dedicated to the education of children, the improvement of the condition of prisons and the care of the sick and the aged. The proposal appeared on the front page of the *Times* (19 August 1854) and in such papers as the *Caledonian Mercury* from Edinburgh, Scotland (31 August 1854), *Liverpool Mercury* (1 September 1854), and *The Maitland Mercury* (9 December 1854). It was an appeal to all women around the world to form central committees whose aim would be international collaboration for creating a better world (Stendahl 154). As Karen Offen points out, "Bremer's peace initiative was but one of a series of transnationalist feminist initiatives that sought to unite women in order to address general societal problems, not only to remedy their effects but, more significantly, to address their causes" (125). Bremer also became active in several charitable institutions.

Many women's rights advocates in Finland considered Bremer their model and precursor. As scholars have observed, Bremer represented an important role model for women authors and in the women's movement, while she also greatly influenced literature in Europe (Grönstrand 47-

8). The demand for improvement of women's situation arrived in Finland especially from Sweden where Bremer had greatly contributed to the discussion on women's social position. According to historian Keijo Virtanen, Bremer's descriptions of the lives of American women gave force to the women's rights movement in Finland in mid-nineteenth century (80). The transformative power of her texts was in great part in the social models she rendered accessible to women for personal advancement, for creating new identities for themselves. Bremer re-created new ideas of womanhood, while she underscored the importance of educational and professional opportunities as exemplified in the New World society.

For Bremer, like for many other emancipated women of the nineteenth century, education played a vital role in the advancement of women's condition in society. In Bremer's travel letters, the descriptions of American mixed schools and listings of courses offered for girls that in Sweden were considered unfit for women's intellect were among the factors that stimulated a change in the educational structure in the Nordic countries. In the early nineteenth century, not only gender but also class conditioned access to education. For instance, only girls from upper social class families (nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, landowners) of countries like Finland were allowed to attend schools. In the second half of the nineteenth century, women's education received increasing attention in Finland, where particularly private schools geared for female education grew in number. The goal was to provide equal educational opportunities for Finnish men and women. Minna Canth (1844-1897), a writer and social activist who held Bremer as her ideal, was actively involved in numerous school projects for girls. The first women's educational institutions leading to a profession were established in Finland in 1859 and 1863. Towards the end of the century, advanced classes, colleges and co-educational schools complemented public schools for girls, whereas in 1882 women could teach in girls' elementary schools. In 1886, the first Finnish school for boys and girls was founded in Helsinki. At the turn of the twentieth century, in 1901, women could attend Finnish universities without the necessity to apply for a special permission. Many women, who were active in furthering educational opportunities for girls, were also involved in women's organizations and temperance work. Lucina Hagman (1853-1946) was one of those emancipated women involved in changing the focus of women's education in the new school system. It is worth noting that she not only read but also translated Bremer's novels, while she also wrote Bremer's biography, which appeared in 1886.

As a result of the activities of women's advocates in various organizations in different countries, the nineteenth-century women's emancipation movement grew into an international collaboration of people and associations dedicated to a common cause. The main influence and contribution for the advancement of women's rights on a worldwide scale came from England and the United States, although also many other European countries played an important role in the international advancement of women's emancipation. For instance, many prominent British feminists found inspiration in France from where the ideas about women's status spread also to Germany, Italy, and the Nordic countries (Offen 97). Yet, pioneering American women, whose example many European women also followed, worked to further women's rights not only within women's organizations but also in the abolitionist and temperance movements and other reform groups where they developed their organizational skills and created female networks.³

Initially the protagonists in the women's rights movement in America, who had emerged from anti-slavery radicalism, were men and women involved in fierce campaigns with radical demands for the emancipation of slaves, improvement of women's social condition, and political and economic rights for working people. In the 1850s, the majority of the participants at the first National Woman's Rights Conventions represented the middle classes. Instead, in the decades

following Bremer's tour, women's emancipation movements became more organized and structured as various associations dedicated specifically to women's cause were founded. In 1869, the National Woman Suffrage Association was established in New York and the American Woman Suffrage Association in Boston. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union was formed in 1874, and in 1876 their first international conference was held in Philadelphia. The progress of women's rights and emancipation of women in the United States as well as Europe advanced rapidly as more and more women, and men, were involved in actively promoting social reform. In a few decades following Bremer's American tour, the progressive New Women had thrust the doors open for women to participate along with men in the social and political life of their countries.

In the 1870s and 1880s, international collaboration became increasingly important: the 'Woman Question' was rapidly turned into an international issue as women joined forces to fight together to gain access to higher education and employment throughout Europe and the United States. Several countries organized parallel campaigns against prostitution, pornography, and for promoting sexual purity. The first international women's congress met in Paris in 1878. In the United States, the National Woman Suffrage Association, set off by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's European visits of 1882, summoned an international council of women to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the first women's rights convention. The conference was held in Washington D.C. late March 1888. As Karen Offen indicates, "the communication of feminist ideas across national and linguistic boundaries and the internationalization of the women's movement would become ever more conspicuous features of European history in the period 1875-90" when women, who participated in conferences in Europe and the United States, were developing international networks of female activists (150). Since the 1880s, also many Finnish organizations were involved in advocating reforms in their society. Among them were the White Ribbon Union and the Finnish Women's Association, which was established in 1884. The latter association joined the International Council of Women in 1888. Although the majority of Finnish women involved in these organizations represented the upper-middle classes, they were engaged in furthering the rights of women from all social classes.⁴

Alexandra Gripenberg—International Networking at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Fredrika Bremer, who fondly had cared for her country of birth, had always followed the developments in Finland with great interest. For instance, in the 1850s she had started corresponding with the Finnish author, Zacharias Topelius, who already was familiar with and admired Bremer's work. The two authors became good friends and ended up exchanging ideas and views about contemporary issues. Bremer, who was familiar with the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* and the national poet Johan Ludwig Runeberg's poems, was interested in the activities of women's organizations in Helsinki (see letter to Topelius, written from Stockholm on 3 March 1854 in *Konstnärsväp* II, 11-12; letter to Topelius 8 February 1855, 14-15). In the years 1855-56 and 1865-66, Topelius, who also was a promoter of women's rights, discussed Bremer and her works, such as *Hertha*, as well as Bremer's ideas and goals for women's emancipation in his correspondence with the poet Runeberg's wife, Fredrika Runeberg (see *Konstnärsväp* I, 42-43; 89-93; 110-114), who by profession was a novelist and journalist and had taken great interest in the Woman Question. She was one of the founders of a women's association in Porvoo (Finland), whose goals were to assist poor women and to maintain a school for less privileged girls. Alexandra Gripenberg, who was influenced both by Bremer and Runeberg, wrote a

biography of the latter, simply titled *Fredrika Runeberg* (1904). Moreover, in the early twentieth century, the Fredrika Bremer Association, founded in 1884, influenced the opinions of many in the Nordic countries who were concerned about the Woman Question (see Ullman 61).

Unsurprisingly, then, in a similar way to Bremer, also the Finnish Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg followed women's emancipation during her tour of the United States in 1887–1888. She, like Bremer before her, used her travel book of the tour to influence women of her country, advance her political agenda, and present role models for other women. Gripenberg, who followed Bremer approximately four decades later, travelled to the United States because of her interest in social questions and women's liberation abroad. While Bremer's visions were formed through personal contact with local people and by studying women both in their domestic and public environments, Gripenberg based her views of American women and their achievements primarily on public presentations she followed at the first International Women's Convention in Washington D.C. that started on 24 March 1888. Her interpretation of America appeared in her travel book from 1889, *Ett halfår i Nya Verlden: Strödda resebilder från Förenta Staterna (A Half Year in the New World)*, which contributed to the awareness of the international efforts of women in advancing women's emancipation. In the book, which was translated into Finnish in 1891, she informed her readers about the origins of American women's rights movement and discussed the current situation of women in American society and within various organizations dedicated to furthering women's rights.

Gripenberg, who was born into an upper class Swedish-speaking family in Finland, was a writer like Bremer; a novelist, editor, and a journalist, who published articles in Finnish and Swedish newspapers, periodicals and women's journals. She was also the author of a book that provided a review of the development of woman's rights in various countries. *Reformarbetet till förbättrande av kvinnans ställning* came out a few years after her American tour, between 1893 and 1903. She was also a leader in Finland's women suffrage and one of the founders of the first women's rights organization in Finland (Suomen Naisyhdistys, Finnish Women's Association) in 1884.

While at the Women's Convention, Gripenberg was able to follow discussions about how the political rights of women were increasing. Before the official meeting in Washington, the delegates from Europe and the United States gathered at the Miller Hotel in New York where Deveraux Blake, president of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association had organized meetings, luncheons, receptions, and a banquet to precede the Washington convention. In Gripenberg's estimate, approximately 600 people were present. These women, Gripenberg claimed, were all "the best women of America" (12). Many women who participated in the New York and Washington meetings had been working for the emancipation of slaves before starting to advance their own gender-specific cause. The participants at the convention, Gripenberg wrote, were "feminists," most of them "youngish, well-educated women, or older ladies who formerly were active in welfare and temperance societies and religious and abolitionist groups" (11). Thus, she recognized the international character of the movement and foregrounded the fact that the advancement of women's rights was a collaboration of representatives from various reform movements.

The second chapter of her travel book, "A Bird's-Eye View of the Women's Convention in Washington," is a report of the meeting held at Riggs House in Washington. About sixty women participated in the event; seven of them were from Europe. As Gripenberg informed, two of these Europeans were from Finland: Gripenberg herself and Alli Trygg-Helenius (12-14). The fact that despite the expenses of travel and stormy March weather, as Gripenberg explains, the

“out-of-the-way Northern European countries had sent three delegates aroused a great deal of amazement, and when Norway and Finland, in response to the roll call, stood up, a wave of curiosity and wonder swept through the group of women assembled there” (12). The high percentage of Finnish women participating in the convention can be seen to testify to the significance the advancement of women’s rights had in Finland. Elizabeth Stanton, president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, opened the meeting and in her speech praised the international pioneer women who included Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Barrett Browning from England, Bremer from Sweden, and many representatives from the United States (Gripenberg 174).

Gripenberg reported about the development in women’s rights during the past forty years, from the first meetings held in 1848-50 that Bremer enthusiastically had witnessed:

When the introductions, which lasted for almost two hours, were over, the speeches began. Mrs. Blake skillfully traced the development of woman’s [sic] rights in America from 1848, when the first small meeting was held at Seneca Falls. Although men such as Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Robert Purvis supported woman’s rights, others ridiculed the women. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton dared to demand the right to vote for women, the Quakeress Lucretia Mott, devoted friend of feminism, shook her head and said, ‘Dear friend Elizabeth, thee has gone too far.’ But in working for the emancipation of slaves, the women advanced their own cause and the age began to understand their demands. Now they stand before the election tables demanding as their right, that they, the mothers of society, should be allowed to formulate those laws which they themselves obey and which they are to teach their children to obey. (Gripenberg 8)

As this passage demonstrates, the idea of demanding the right to vote for women was perceived as too radical even among the pioneer feminists themselves. Despite the ridicule, however, the most courageous of them continued to fight for what they believed women deserved.

From Gripenberg’s text, it is possible to sense the excitement and enthusiasm that surrounded the event. “The interest and excitement which prevailed on Monday the twenty-sixth as the discussion was begun cannot be described in words,” she wrote. To quote Gripenberg:

When Mrs. Stanton, attired in a black satin dress, a white gauze scarf around her neck, rose with the dignity of a septuagenarian to make the opening address, she was greeted with reverberating applause. Men and women stood up, waved their handkerchiefs, and wept. Mrs. Stanton’s speech was not brilliant oratory, but its essence was unshakable conviction, and the fire of genius inspired it. [...] She portrayed especially, with sad playfulness, the contempt and insults formerly suffered by the friends of woman’s rights. “‘Lucy Stone, Miss Anthony, and I,’ she said in her calm alto voice, ‘still remember the time when the audience greeted us with rotten eggs and not with flowers and applause as today.’” (Gripenberg 15).

Not only had the women paved the way for obtaining more rights, educational and professional alternatives for women, but they had changed the opinions and attitudes of those who had been objecting to women being empowered.

During the convention, the participants covered a variety of topics. The progress women had made in the preceding decades in improving their situation was evident. As Gripenberg informed, they talked about legal issues, political conditions, education, philanthropies, and temperance work; they discussed women's political rights and examined women's activities in various industries and professions, including women's achievements in the agriculture and manufacturing industries, and women working as doctors, journalists, lawyers, ministers, and teachers. From the unusual first women physicians Bremer had encountered four decades earlier, women doctors had become more common, also due to the educational opportunities that now were available to them. To quote Gripenberg:

On Wednesday women's activities in various industries and professions were examined. Mrs. Laura Johns of Kansas presided. To a European the discussions of this day were perhaps the most interesting. It was surprising what these women had achieved in agriculture, cattle raising, manufacturing industries, and vine cultivation; and also as doctors, journalists, lawyers, ministers, and teachers of all kinds. In comparing what one heard with what one saw with one's own eyes of these sweet, pleasant, and friendly women, one became even more firmly convinced of the truth of the assertion that the chief trait of American women is practicality. In spite of her 'emancipation,' every drop of blood in her from head to foot is practical, and she probably despises nothing more deeply than impracticality. (Gripenberg 18; italics original)

Hence, Gripenberg recognized national traits in American women, which was no hindrance to international collaboration and networking. The practicality, together with the emancipation and success in various professions, made the American women perfect models for women of other countries to follow. One of the American women had already been paving the way for Hillary Clinton: a certain Mrs. L [Mrs. Belva Ann Lockwood, of Washington DC] was among the highly ambitious women and, as Gripenberg informed, "was well known because she had tried to become a candidate for the presidency of the United States" (23). It seems that to her, gender-specific limitations had ceased to exist.

The first discussion started from the suggestion to establish a permanent International Council of Women (Gripenberg 15-21). Clara Colby's paper, the *Woman's Tribune*, published daily reports of the convention. The convention offered the period's transnational women an opportunity to express their opinions and encourage other women to recognize female competence and growing power. Moreover, it was an invaluable occasion for women to exchange ideas and information, while forming networks with other internationally oriented women.

Gripenberg's narrative revealed that the situation of women was carefully examined from different viewpoints, including scientific argumentation. Among those in the audience of the Washington convention Gripenberg mentioned Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone, one of the vanguard women in the feminist movement and editor of *Woman's Journal* (13). In addition, Clara Barton, founder of American Red Cross, was one of the speakers, together with Leonora Barry, "a woman of working-class origin, who has made her own way in the world" and at the

time was an active member in a large workingmen's organization called the Knights of Labor (18). Friday evening, according to Gripenberg, "turned out lively because the subject for discussion was *political conditions*, and politics has the faculty of making the warm hot and the hot boiling. The subject was discussed *con amore*" (20; italics original). The sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Isabella, spoke powerfully "on the constitutional rights of women of the United States in demanding the vote for themselves," while Zarelda Wallace (the mother of Lew Wallace, author of *Ben Hur*) "made a terse speech on 'The Moral Power of the Ballot'" (Gripenberg 20-21). Helen Gardener's address, "Sex in Brain," was, according to Gripenberg's testimony, based on scientific research and its aim was to demonstrate that the presumed inferiority of woman's brain was a mere hypothesis which could not be scientifically proved (20). The talks, together with Gripenberg's summary of the event, served to encourage and empower women and provide them influential role models.

Among the participants were many famous American writers and speakers who had influenced women all over the world. For instance, Frances Willard, the President of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union and a central figure in establishing the first international organization for women—the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union—spoke on temperance. Her recommendation that women unite was, to quote Gripenberg, "majestically effective" (13, 19). Willard was an admired figure internationally, and following her example, the first Finnish regional White Ribbon association was founded in 1896. This association was a direct result of the efforts of Alli Trygg, who had participated in the World's White Ribbon conference organized in London. Trygg was also one of the founding members of the Finnish Women's Association. At the International Council of Women in Washington, she delivered her speech on the last day of conference. In her address, Trygg urged women to form a tradition of transatlantic female communication that she defined a "golden cable of sympathy."⁵ International collaboration then, was considered of utmost importance to the future development of women's movements, as it was during Bremer's time.

Gripenberg further described how both men and women applauded Mrs. Stanton's speech as she recalled the forty years that had elapsed since the first women's meeting at Seneca Falls. On the platform sat about a dozen women who had worked with Stanton on behalf of women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Frederick Douglass, "one of the oldest friends of woman's rights," was in the audience, together with many others who had campaigned for antislavery. As Gripenberg wrote, these people, who had started working together to free the slaves, "had served the ideal which in America paved the way and prepared minds for another even greater ideal. This new ideal no longer affected a single class or race but all mankind" (16). This ideal, she further specified, was equal rights for men and women, regardless of class or race. It was the same idealistic projection Bremer had formulated in her travel letters written at the time the first women's meetings were held in America. Many participants at the Washington convention, who represented different classes, races, and gender and were equally dedicated to the cause of emancipation, shared this idealized view and became quite emotional. Gripenberg reported that people shed tears of "pride, hope, and thankfulness" (16). What Bremer had recognized as a nascent movement, Gripenberg acknowledged four decades later had developed into organized activism. In her travel text, she testified how emancipation movements had advanced on all fronts, beyond gender and racial lines, and in equal measure within women's rights associations, labour organizations, and temperance movements.

After her return to Finland, Gripenberg continued to dedicate her time to women's suffrage. During her tours abroad, she had formed friendships with many notable women who

were actively promoting women's rights. While in America, she had met in person the women whose publications she had read and whose work she had followed. Upon her return to Finland, she continued corresponding with many of them. She also translated the speeches and articles of such women as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton into Finnish and Swedish. The texts circulated widely in Finland. In 1903, Gripenberg expressed her gratitude to American women in a letter addressed to Susan B. Anthony: "Often I wonder if you have an idea of how much you and Mrs. Stanton have influenced my life [...] I want that you should know how vividly we Finnish women feel our gratitude to you, how we follow what you speak and write" (qtd. in McFadden 171). Gripenberg became President of the first Finnish women's rights organization that she had been involved in founding, active in international women's organizations and continued networking with women from various countries.

The impact of a more organized women's movement, especially on an international level, affected politics and gave a decisive push to social and political reform in various European countries. Among the most important international women's organizations were the International Council of Women (ICW) and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). As scholar Susan Zimmerman argues, these organizations tackled complex political issues.⁶ The many problems included the definition of member associations, for instance, how to solve "the Finnish-Russian problem" which concerned the status of Finland that politically was an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. The 1906 resolution of ICW gave the following political guideline for defining its member associations: "Any country – even if not possessing a wholly independent government – but possessing the power to fully enfranchise its own women citizens, shall be considered a nation [...] and may organize a National Woman Suffrage Association which may be eligible to membership of the Alliance" (Zimmerman 101). As Zimmermann explains,

Through nationalizing organizational structures of existing women's movements in individual countries, international interest and organization in the women's movement contributed substantially to the development of the 'female half' of the nation in general, and to a female and feminist public sphere within nations in particular. (107)

Hence, women's associations triggered a growing awareness of the need to include national concerns in the discussion of women's emancipation. From the initial concerns about racial issues to focusing on women's rights, the central interest returned to more universal and, at the same time, national concerns. The two Finnish member organizations in the international councils were the Finnish Women's Association and the Feminist Union established in 1892. Gripenberg was elected the Honorary Vice President of the International Council in 1893 and she was the treasurer at the International Council of Women from 1893 to 1899 (Zimmerman 98-99, 114-15, end note 51). In this way, she held leadership positions and took on responsibilities within international women's organizations.

In addition to associations dedicated to women's rights, other organisations were active in Finland where women were participating in youth and temperance movements and working with various labour movements. These organisations offered women an opportunity to participate in and contribute to the improvement of society. At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of the Finnish population was without any rights to influence political decision making since these rights were granted on the basis of social position, property, or capacity to pay taxes. Thus,

many men joined Finnish women in demanding equal rights with the privileged minority. This meant, as historian Irma Sulkunen observes, that many of the nineteenth-century reform movements in Finland were non-gender-specific (12). The right to vote was merely one aspect of a larger fight for social equality.

In 1906, Finland became the first European country to confer women the right to vote together with the right for women to stand for parliamentary office. In March 1907, Finnish women had the first opportunity to practice their newly granted right to vote. Gripenberg was among the nineteen women elected to serve in the Parliament of Finland where she represented the conservative Finnish Party. These first women parliamentarians represented both bourgeois and working class (McFadden 179). In this way, they brought together different social classes, as well as bringing about unification beyond gender limits, with both men and women enjoying active citizenship.

In conclusion, the efforts of such influential women as Bremer and Gripenberg, who used fiction, journalism, and travel writing to promote their ideas, ideologies, and political agendas, played an important role in paving the way for women's equality in countries like Finland. Although the decisive consequences that led to attaining social equality can be traced to Finland's internal social and political struggles, the influence of international networking was undeniable. Indeed, the final results were obtained in collaboration with international women's associations. What had initially started in the United States as a movement allied with abolitionism had expanded into an international gathering of associations pursuing universal suffrage and emancipation. In her address on July 16 of 1906, in celebration of the great victory of women to gain their rights to vote and eligibility to be elected to the Finnish Parliament, Gripenberg expressed her gratitude and paid tribute to the women of England, America, and all over the world:

The gratitude which we women feel is mingled with the knowledge that we are much less worthy of this great success than the women of England and America, who have struggled so long and so faithfully, with much more energy and perseverance than we. I use this occasion to bring the thanks from the women of Finland to our sisters all over the world who have, by their untiring work, educated public opinion and thus enabled us to gain our rights.⁷

As Gripenberg testified, the influence of American pioneers, together with the international collaboration of women, had a significant role in women's struggle for independence and participation in full citizenship in such countries as Finland.

Although Gripenberg had claimed that there were differences between nationalities, for instance, in the ways Americans expressed themselves—she claimed that American women's "many statements sounded to Finnish ears like empty bombast, but that praise originated in national custom and was not the fault of the women" (22)—both Gripenberg and Bremer believed in international collaboration and networking that would encourage efforts to reform legal, economic, social, and political structures that endorsed subjugation and injustice. As an example can be mentioned Bremer's call for an international alliance of women, which was published in the *Times* of London in the summer of 1854, immediately following the outbreak of the Crimean War. It was a call to oppose the effects of war and to contribute to a peaceful development of well-being. As Offen explains, Bremer's 'Invitation to a Peace Alliance' "proposed uniting philanthropic Christian women across boundaries and borders, inviting them

‘to join hands as sisters,’ and to learn from one another, in order to ‘alleviate the miseries of the earth’” (125). Moreover, print culture had provided women new possibilities for expression (Offen xii), new avenues for promoting their ideological agendas nationally as well as internationally. Novels, travel books, lectures and speeches of women’s rights advocates were translated into different languages thus making radical ideas accessible to like-minded women in other countries. Women like Bremer and Gripenberg intertwined social criticism with travel writing and narrative; they used fiction, journalism, private correspondence, and travel letters to promote new ideas and ideologies regarding the position of women, encouraging and influencing others and instigating changes in legislation. In their travel texts, Bremer and Gripenberg presented the “emancipated ladies” of America as models for women in their own countries. Subsequently, their own work and example further empowered women in their international efforts towards suffrage. It has been argued that the women’s movement in Sweden began with Bremer, and that she stressed the responsibility of small nations to “contribute their experience and to influence other nations: ‘A small nation can thereby be great; a small country can gain unsuspected influence’” (qtd. in Stendahl 4, 164). In vast territories like the United States and small countries like Finland, women were campaigning to improve their position in society and gain legal rights that would guarantee them independence; they were engaged in charitable work and in helping the poor and less privileged. In Finland women were active participants, side by side with men, in their fight for equal rights. Indeed, societies like Finland, Offen argues, “set in place models of egalitarian relations between the sexes that, in spite of their shortcomings, are widely admired” (xii). As Offen has concluded, “the history of feminism is integral to Europe’s” and I would like to add the United States’ “internal political history”(xiii). This political history follows women’s demands for improved living conditions and full citizenship, and, more importantly, the history of socio-political change acknowledges the efforts of pioneers like Bremer and Gripenberg, who worked in relation with and reference to feminist movements in other countries.

Notes

1. For biographical information, see, for example, Charlotte Bremer; about the reception of *Homes of the New World* see Dana and Hawthorne, and Olson.
2. About changes in Swedish laws, see, for example, Olivecrona 200-16.
3. Ramirez et al. examine women’s movements and international organizations that appealed to world models and principles. As these scholars argue, women’s suffrage was “an international crusade drawing on universalistic principles” (736). Paxton et al. in a similar way note the international influences on female suffrage, “both by acknowledging the size and scope of domestic influences and by addressing a much wider range of milestones for women in politics” (900). In her book-length study McFadden examines the “developing consciousness of the significance of Atlantic community connections among women” (5). She elaborates on how women’s international network was constructed by some key figures in women’s rights movements in the United States and Europe and the way the international collaboration of women and associations influenced women’s suffrage on a worldwide scale.
4. For the development of Finnish organizations, see, for example, www.konkordia-liitto.com/historiaa.html; www.aanioikeus.fi/artikkelit/tuomaala.htm; www.aanioikeus.fi/artikk

elit/juntti.htm; <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/nordeuropaforum/2007-1/sulkunen-irma-27/PDF/sulkunen.pdf> (accessed 9 November 2010).

5. For more information about Willard's influence in Europe and the White Ribbon Association, see Bordin; about Alli Trygg and Gripenberg, see McFadden 171-81.
6. Women's international organizations served also for constructing collective identity. Rupp's essay examines how the sense of collective identity was created, while she also looks at the way it was linked to feelings of nationalism versus internationalism within women's organizations especially in the period from the early 1900s to 1945.
7. The excerpt is from Gripenberg's "The Great Victory in Finland," published in the *Englishwoman's Review* on 16 July 1906. It is quoted in Bell and Offen (230).

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