An Unholy Union? –
Eugenic Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract:
Eugenic feminism describes as concept the interest of feminists in the early twentieth century in eugenic ideas. Eugenic feminists used eugenic rhetoric of racial degeneration and the importance of reproduction and maternalism to support their demands for female empowerment and equality.

This paper sets the phenomenon of eugenic feminism in the international context. I show that eugenic feminism can be observed in most Western countries but was shaped by the different national and cultural settings. However, eugenic feminists were widely joined in the idea that motherhood constituted the natural contribution of women to the society and recognized a higher social recognition, so that women could fulfil their national duty in a more comprehensive way.

Keywords: feminism, eugenics, maternalism, race, 20th century

Biography:
Merle Wessel (b. 1985) is a Doctoral Student at the Centre for Nordic Studies/ University of Helsinki. In her PhD project “Eugenic Feminism in the Nordic Countries, 1890-1939” she discusses the involvement of Nordic feminists in the eugenics debates in the early twentieth century and the effects of these debates on how Nordic women’s bodies and sexuality were perceived as well as their social positioning in the early Nordic welfare states. She has published articles about castration, eugenics, race and public health. Her main research interests are cultural history, gender history and history of medicine.

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Introduction

Eugenic feminism as independent phenomenon describes the interest of first-wave feminists into eugenic ideas and the use of eugenic rhetoric for the argumentation of the enhancement of women’s rights in the early twentieth century. The term eugenic feminists was not a self-declaration but was introduced by the US legal scholar Mary Ziegler in 2008. Ziegler argues in context of US feminists and eugenics movements between the 1890s and 1930s that the feminists redefined eugenic ideas different from the general eugenicist’s ideas and created like that the special form of eugenic feminism. The eugenic feminist movement was not united as such, according to Ziegler, they had in common the idea that the decrease of the racial quality could be prevented through greater political, social, sexual and economic equality between men and women.¹

In this paper I show that eugenic feminism, similar to eugenics and feminism, was not a united movement but took various shapes from the use of explicit eugenic rhetoric to enhance women’s rights to more hidden use of eugenic ideology. I argue that several internationally known feminists, like the US-American birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, Swedish social reformer Alva Myrdal or the British Fabian Beatrice Webb used eugenic ideologies to support their ideas about social reforms in context of the women’s movement. I do not claim that these women used exclusively eugenic ideas in their argumentation but that eugenics was one shaping way for them to approach the social positioning of women within their societies. I show that eugenic feminists can be found in science, like the Danish physician Bodil Hjorth or Norwegian geneticist Kristine Bonnevie, as intellectuals like the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman or as political actors, like Alva Myrdal. By presenting international eugenic feminist I demonstrate that eugenic feminism was a Western phenomenon. However, the appearance of eugenic feminists in the Nordic countries and their societal impact was in comparison to the size of the countries remarkable.

This paper draws mostly on a theoretical discussion of the content of the concept of eugenic feminism. However, to support my analysis I rely on sources, which are mainly written publication by eugenic feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Karolina Widerström or Margaret Sanger. All in this paper used sources were intended for the public and not of a private nature, like letters or diaries. They are mostly books, articles and pamphlets, which did not have the exclusive aim to discuss eugenics from a

feminist perspective but to interweave feminist’s demands for female empowerment with eugenics ideas.

This paper is divided into four main parts. In the first part I discuss my conceptualization of eugenics as cultural phenomenon and situate this paper in the existing research. In the following I take up three of the main topics which were important for eugenic feminists; race, motherhood, and the position of men and women in society. All three topics were also important for eugenicists as well as feminists but I illustrate here how they were shaped differently by the eugenic feminist discourse.

**Eugenics, Feminism and Eugenic Feminism**

The peak of eugenic feminism can be seen in the interwar period in the Western world. This was connected to the overall greater social and political interest, the industrialization and urbanization. Connected to the rapid modernization of Western societies this led to a mixture of optimism and “Machbarkeitswahn” but at the same to a sense of crisis and pessimism about the overall development of the nations.\(^2\) This is a very striking description of the situation in most Western countries, and also in the Nordic countries, during this period. Modern societies were fascinated but also frightened by the progress. Scientific development seem to make everything possible, people could travel faster and wider, greater buildings could be built, incurable disease could be cured than ever before.

However, there was also a downside to this. The progress of science and medicine meant also that more people survived. Individuals, who would have died due to a lack of health care, and would never be able to reach adult age, now were able to reproduce themselves and transmit their degenerated genes to the next generation. Furthermore, the industrialization did not only mean new jobs but also due to a higher amount of machines, less need of workers. Unemployment and economic crisis struck repeatedly. Not only in the Nordic countries, but everywhere in Europe. Mass immigration was a common phenomenon and during the first half of the century it was perceived that all the good people had left and only the cripples and degenerated individuals were left behind. The First World War showed another monstrosity of the industrial development. More people than ever could be killed with new weapons and entire countries could be invaded faster than ever. The industrial progress was a two-sided

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sword, which did not only progress to the people but forced them to make long term adjustments to their lives.

In this paper eugenics is not only understood as isolated phenomenon of the early twentieth century, which was based on underdeveloped research about heredity, and form there misconcepted policies of the restriction of the population’s reproduction, which were revised after the horror of the Holocaust. I argue that eugenics was (and also is) a lifestyle ideology. Eugenics, not only as science, but as an ideology of life provided the people with an opportunity to bring order into the chaos of their time. Defined through ideas of control, streamlining, rationality and order, eugenics could combine the advantages for the new sciences with the wish for the order of past times. As Christina Cogdell argues, eugenics was a central pillar if modernism and eugenic ideas can be find in many ideologies and movements of the time. It influenced debates about birth control, prohibition, free love, anti-immigration, segregation, feminism, socialism or maternalism. Eugenics was not isolated from the social developments but interacted strongly with them. It was not only interesting for fascist or authoritarian regimes, but could find supported in all political camps, from socialism to capitalism. Eugenics was also of interest for the great amount of social movements appearing during the turn of the century and in the interwar period. The temperance movement used eugenic ideas to prove the poisonous effect of alcohol on the individual and the society, the worker’s and socialist movements used eugenic ideas to prove the degeneration of the upper classes and demand a worker’s revolution, activists for sexual liberation argued that eugenics could help to make people aware about their sexuality and like that end the ongoing degeneration through ignorance of biological facts. Also, the feminist movement swayed intensively with eugenics ideas to emphasise the importance of female empowerment in the new societal order, as I demonstrate in the following.

First wave feminism appeared in a timeframe of nearly 150 years and had several generations in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Yet, it would be wrong to talk about one feminist movement. Feminist movements were shaped significantly by various influence like the national and political context, class, race, urban or rural environment, education and much more. Working class feminists had very different agendas from bourgeois feminists and feminists in the United States differed from German, Swedish or Finnish feminists. The first generation was primarily concerned with the struggle for

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suffrage. The second generation enjoyed this achievement and was now interested to be involved stronger in political and social discourses. This can certainly not be seen as exclusive rule and the overlapping of generations and individuals was self-evident. Also eugenic feminism was not a closed, self-contained group of women. Like all feminists, also these women combined their interest for eugenics with other political and social ideologies. Eugenics was not their only interest. Furthermore, their perception of eugenics and use of its rhetoric was shaped by their own class and social status, by their education, civil status, profession etc. Eugenic feminism was not a one-way street but rather a great lake, in which various ideas and ideologies were collected and intertwined, and got a new point of view by looking at it through the lens of eugenics.

Research about eugenic feminism in the global context is currently divided into two areas; the area of literature studies and the area of the history of women and feminism. Especially in the United States in the last decade several English scholars began to read feminist literature from a eugenic point of view and detected like that the eugenic, and often also racial, implications by first wave feminist writers. The English scholar Asha Nadkarni has published several books and articles about the impact of eugenics in American first wave feminism. Nadkarni analyses for example the book *Mother India* by the female American historian Katherine Mayo (1867-1940). Nadkarni demonstrates that Mayo, who was convinced of white supremacy and showed critical views on the ability for Indian independence, took a stand for the control of female reproduction through the state, in India as well as in the United States. Mayo was, according to Nadkarni, obsessed with the reproduction of the nation. She criticised American women in the early twentieth century for not fulfilling their reproductive duty and demanded that woman’s sexuality must be controlled and channelled into reproductive work for the state.

Mayo’s perception that female reproduction needed to serve the nation, did find several supporters among the American first wave feminists. Most known is probably the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). Nadkarni as well as Alys Eve Weinbaum have researched about the eugenic implications in Gilman Perkins’ books.

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5 Ibid., p. 807.
Gilman Perkins, according to Weinbaum, thought that there was something fundamentally wrong with the reproduction process in the United States in the early twentieth century. The fear about degeneration was in the United States, differently from the Nordic and European countries, defined by the anxiety about mass-immigration from Europe but also internal racial conflicts. The United States introduced in 1924 the 

*American Immigration Act*, which should regulate immigration with racial ideas in mind. Especially the immigration of people from Eastern and Southern Europe, considered of low quality, should be prevented through that.

Perkins Gilman, as white, middle class feminist, was concerned that the immigration would have an impact on the population quality in the United States. Furthermore, she had radical feminist ideas about motherhood and the role of mothers in the nation building. She argued that the women’s work was not only in the house but also in building a better society. Women were responsible with their reproductive function to contribute to improvement of the nation. The notion that female reproduction was not an individual or family matter but a concern of the entire society was a common argument by eugenic feminists to seek for empowerment and civil rights for reproductive beneficial women. This argument was usually framed in the national settings; in the US for example through racial and immigration fears and in the Nordic countries rather through emigration concerns as well as class issues.

However, not only feminist authors in the first wave showed interest in eugenics but also various other feminist activists. They were usually joined in being white and middle class, which might be considered as a universal definition of eugenic feminists. Additionally, they had the idea that motherhood did not receive enough social, political and economic recognition in their societies. Eugenic feminists argued that the responsible mother needs to be recognized likewise to the working man as valuable member of the society, since she is contributing with her reproductive work to the success of a nation. The aim was to uplift motherhood at least as high as productive labour, or even higher, to make the mother equal to the man. They argued that women were in need of equal rights, because without them they could not fulfil their reproductive work to the fullest. However, it was not the notion that women were the same as men but they should

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7 Ibid., p. 271.

8 NADKARNI: "Reproducing Feminism", p. 222.

be still equal. Eugenic feminists did not seek for a resolving of traditional family and social structures. The place of the woman was at home, but the home was extended to the public and the mother was not only the mother to her own children but to the children of the nation. The feminist liberation, which was sought by eugenic feminists, was the strengthening of the traditional role of women as carer for the family and the nation. They were frequently critical towards labour market participation of middle class women and identified this as rejection of their female role.

Their argumentation was directed to their own identity group, the white, middle class woman. However, they did recognize the struggle of for example working class women and tried from their own point of view to improve their living situation. Eugenic feminists criticised frequently the double burden of housework and labour outside the house, which was according to them obeyed on working class women by the capitalist system. They tried actively to improve the lives of working class women by demanding political support and benefits for them as well as offering them support for example in context of birth control and abortion as well as in education of child and sick care, improvement of living conditions or better nutrition.

Research from a historical point of view about eugenic feminists takes often place in analysing the maternal argument of them. Christoph Sachße discusses for example demand for the higher recognition of motherhood for eugenic reasons from the bourgeois women’s movement during the turn of the century in Germany. Mariana Valverde and Angelique Richardson examine in their publications the maternal agenda of eugenic feminists in England. Valverde emphasises also the role of the first British female physician Elizabeth Blackwell in eugenic feminism. This is also an important aspect in this paper, because several of the here discussed women were, besides being feminists, also trained physicians and used their medical education to accentuate their eugenic agenda.

Also the English-speaking research world in overseas has developed a strong interest in eugenic feminism in the last decade. Mary Ziegler, for example,

12 VALVERDE: “When the Mother of the Race”, p. 5.
delivered a ground-breaking study about eugenic feminists in the United States and established the term eugenic feminism as concept (though it was already used before, for instance by Angelique Richardson).\textsuperscript{13} Erin Moss and Hendrikus Stam have discussed eugenic feminism in Canada, especially in context of mental health and the notion of a decline of it.\textsuperscript{14} Cecily Devereux shows the radical ideas about motherhood and eugenics by the Canadian feminist Nellie McClung and Marilyn Lake demonstrates how eugenic feminists in Australia planned to introduce a special citizenship only for successful mothers.\textsuperscript{15}

All these studies demonstrate that eugenic feminism was not minor appearance in the women’s movements during the turn of the century but constituted one pillar of feminism in the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Certainly, eugenic feminism was shaped by the national context and could show significant differences. However, the eugenic feminists were also joined in the idea that their reproductive function made them somewhat special in the society and that this speciality needed to be recognized, in particular in eugenically troubled times.

\textit{Concept of Race in Eugenic Feminism}

The question of race was central in the eugenic discourse overall. However, it is important to distinguish two different concepts of race. On the one hand, when referring to race, for example in context of race quality or population quality, eugenicists used the term race to describe the human race overall without making a remark to racial hierarchies, though white superiority might be assumed as self-evident. The Finnish physician Harry Federley warned that the use the Swedish term “rashygien”, based on the German “Rassenhygiene” can lead to unfortunate connotations. He feared that the word “race” might be understood in this context as different human races in a hierarchical order but not as human race overall. Further, he argued that different human races cannot be positioned in hierarchies as such and that this would not express the intention of rational eugenics. He suggested that it would be better to speak of “arvhälsovård”, roughly translated as genetic or

\textsuperscript{13} ZIEGLER: “Eugenic Feminism.” pp. 211- 235.
inheritance health care. Though race played also here an important role, one might speak rather of a racial than a racist perception in this context.

On the other hand, other eugenicists indeed used the term race to distinguish different races among the human race and allocate them in racial hierarchies. The German racial researchers Eugen Fischer, Erwin Bauer and Fritz Lenz argued for example that

“(…) it is not exaggerated, when one claims that the Nordic race marches on the top of humanity regarding mental ability. It is also Near Eastern and Oriental races in intellectual ability generally superior, though not always in context of receptive intelligence.”¹⁷

Fischer, Bauer and Lenz created a racial hierarchy of different human races, in which the Nordic race was in mental and physical ability at the top and other races were quality-wise beneath. However, not all eugenicist and racial hygienists were convinced by this hierarchization of the human race.

Nikolas Rose argues that race in eugenics discourses was frequently understood differently from the way we understand race today. He claims that race was used by eugenicists as concept to describe the struggle of nations in the early twentieth century as struggle of races.¹⁸ Despite Rose's discussion of biopolitics can be criticized in many ways; especially his notion that contemporary biomedicine has no eugenic connotations must be questioned. His argument that the struggle of races was indeed a struggle of nations in the eugenics discourse is helpful to entangle the complicated understanding of race in eugenic research. When eugenicists used race, they usually meant the population of their nation. The struggle of races, so often discussed by eugenicists, were often indeed a struggle of the nations in the rise of nationalism in modernity in the time around the Great War, which constituted the great clash of nations and a raise of a new form nationalism, based on biological ideas and fueled by social darwinistic concepts, in the Western world. In this paper I follow Rose's notion that race

¹⁷ "(…) es nicht (sic) übertrieben ist, wenn man sagt, dass die nordische Rasse hinsichtlich der geistigen Begabung an der Spitze der Menschheit marschiert. Auch der vorderasiatischen und orientalischen Rasse ist sie an schöpferischer Kraft des Geistes im Durchschnitt wohl überlegen, wenn auch nicht an aufnehmender Intelligenz.” Erwin BAUR, Eugen FISCHER and Fritz LENZ: Menschliche Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene, Munich, Lehmans Verlag 1931, p. 547.
symbolized the population of a nation rather than a nation-crossing notion of a biological race. For this reason race and the discussion of race has very little place in this study, to the surprise and also the criticism of many scholars, but is subsumed under the discussion of population, nation and society, which were the actual actors in the struggle of the races in the early twentieth century.

Yet in the beginning of the twentieth century white womanhood became central in the discussion about evolution of the race. The focus on race by the eugenic feminists has contributed to this change. One of the main arguments of eugenic feminists for the enhancement of women’s rights was that the political and societal limitation of women would contribute negatively to the racial struggles of contemporary times. Women, as argued by sociologist Mariana Valverde, were defined by eugenic feminists as the reproducer of the race which gave them the entitlement to civil rights. With their reproductive function they could hinder and help the civilization and that gave them a central position in society.

American feminist and author Charlotte Perkins Gilman took a prominent position in the racial discourse of eugenic feminism. Gilman has criticized in her book *Women and Eugenics* the economic dependence on the sexual partner, which, according to her, can only be found among the human species. She argues that

“For, in her (woman’s) position of economic dependence in the sex-relation, sex-distinction is with her not only a means of attracting a mate, as with all creatures, but as means of getting her livelihood, as is the case with no other creature under heaven. Because of the economic dependence of the human female on her mate, she is modified to sex to an excessive degree. This excessive modification she transmits to her children; and so is steadily implanted in the human constitution the morbid tendency to excess in this relation (…).”

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20 VALVERDE: "‘When the Mother of the Race is Free’, p. 4.
However, Gilman considered Social Darwinism as the way out of the dilemma. Social Darwinism served her as justification for the socio-political emancipation of women. Gilman argued, that the economic and sexual dependency of women on the male species affects negatively the human and racial development. Female emancipation would have a positive contribution to the individual and racial level of human kind.\textsuperscript{23}

In eugenic feminism, race was used as concept to on the one hand warn about the racial struggles Western societies currently experienced. This was connected to the overall concern about the decrease of the population quality and increase of the population quantity, at least among certain classes. The crisis of the population was not a specifically feminists topic but can be found widely among Western nations in the early twentieth century as social problem. However, eugenic feminists used this race struggle as argument for the enhancement of women’s rights. They argued that women, eugenic favorable women, can only contribute to the struggle against the decay of the race when they receive equal civil rights. The demand for rights was not only related to suffrage but also to for example equal status in marriage, inheritance rights and economic independence. The extension of civil rights for women would provide them with a better political and societal foundation to fulfill their national duty of being a mother and raising the next generation of citizens.

\textit{Motherhood}

This argumentation leads to the second central topic of eugenic feminists; motherhood. As we have seen, mothers were the central personage in the demand for equal rights by eugenic feminists. However, eugenic feminists created a specific perception of motherhood and who would be a beneficial mother. Canadian psychologist Hendrikus Stam argues in his joint publication with Erin Moss about eugenic feminists in Canada that motherhood was transformed from a private matter to a social function. They show that eugenicists and feminists had the aim to improve the society in common.\textsuperscript{24} Eugenicists recognized the crucial role of women for moral education and societal reforms. They valued the maternal capability of women and considered women as the real guardians of the human race.\textsuperscript{25} Eugenics was in that sense not misogynist but the idea

\textsuperscript{23} Jemima REPO: \textit{The Biopolitics of Gender}, Helsinki, 2011, pp. 120-121.

\textsuperscript{24} MOSS and STAM: “From Suffrage to Sterilization”, p. 105.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 108.
about the role of the woman in a modern society, primarily as mother, connected eugenic and feminist thoughts.

Though, eugenicists as well as feminists considered women as important people in the racial struggles, this consideration appealed not to all women in the nation. Class was a leading social category eugenic feminists used to define women as valuable mothers in the race struggle or not. The prominent US-American birth control activist Margaret Sanger, who used frequently eugenic rhetoric, argued in her pamphlet *Family Limitation* (1917) that working-class women should not have more than two children, because they would not be able to care for more. Furthermore, more children are often not wanted by working-class women but the lack of care and hygiene in this class often did not prevent this, Sanger claimed.  

She ended with the idea that

> “Women of intelligence who refuse to have children until they are ready for them, keep definite track of the date of their menstrual period.”

Sanger connected here the intelligence of a woman with the knowledge and understanding of her body. Due to the lack of safe contraception methods, the monitoring of the menstrual cycle for fertile and infertile days but also to ensure the health of the female body was advised. A responsible or intelligent woman would know, in Sanger’s thinking, her body best. She controls it and has an advanced knowledge in what stage her body and mind has to be to become a mother. Sanger stated that it is a matter of intelligent and class if women are able to be considered and planned mothers. Not every woman, in particular a woman from the working class, was able to control her and her husband’s sex drive and only have children when the social and economic circumstances are right. Here it must be pointed out that the perception of the lower classes differed in the United States, and also Great Britain, from the Nordic countries. In the Anglophone countries the working class was widely considered as the social and racial polluters. However, in the Nordic countries the lower classes were divided in the working class, which was not considered as overall racially dangerous and the under-class, which was due to their various genetic and social defects, the clear cause for the decrease of the population quality.

English literature researcher Cecily Devereux shows that feminists with a eugenic interest divided womanhood in the United States mainly in two groups. There

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27 Ibid., p. 4.
was on the one hand the already be-spoken “mother of the race” who contributed with her maternal and reproductive ability to the society. On the other hand there was the “new woman”, who stood with her aim to overcome gender-based restrictions, demands for higher education or the combination of motherhood and work, in opposition to racial motherhood.\textsuperscript{28} However, it might be more purposeful to identify three different types of women in eugenic feminist ideology. First the “mother of the race”, who used her reproductive function to contribute positively to society, secondly the working-class (or partly lower class, depending on the national context) woman who lacked of the mental ability to use her reproductive function beneficially and thirdly the “new woman”, who neglected her societal duty, which nature provided her with her reproductive function and aimed for selfish self-realization.

After demonstrating the different kinds of women, eugenic feminists defined, it appears necessary to also look more closely how they actually understood the “mother of the race”, their ideal woman, and motherhood as societal function. It is certainly not exaggerated to say that eugenic feminists created a new cult of motherhood.\textsuperscript{29} Here the example of eugenic feminists with maternal tendencies might be most enlightened. The German feminist and intellectual Helene Stöcker was certainly one of the leading characters in this discourse. Philosopher Penelope Deutscher argues in her article about reproductive politics and biopolitics in early twentieth century Germany that German feminists emphasized along with the demand for the extension of female rights, also the responsibility women carried with their reproductive function. Deutscher says that this claim is frequently understood in research as pressure on women to procreate. However it can likewise be understood as a demand for conscious reproduction. Similar to Margaret Sanger’s request, quality not quantity was the leading idea.\textsuperscript{30}

The mother of the race was a dutiful mother, not only in the upbringing of her children but also in the consideration when and how many children she should have. Not only she was central in this decision but also the societal impact of her procreation should be considered by her. She would ask herself, before conceiving, how many children could my husband’s work feed? Do I have the mental and physical strength to give birth and raise a healthy child? Are there any reasons, for example genetic defects,

\textsuperscript{28} DEVEREUX: Nellie L. McClung, p. 22.
in my family or my husband’s family which would prevent me from having a healthy child? Motherhood became a patriotic and national cause, as Turda argues. The birth of a child should contribute to the strengthening of the nation. The birth of a child was not a private matter anymore but of major concern of the state.31

The family and reproduction was central in the eugenic discourse overall. The fear of the decline of the population quality was connected with concerns about the situation and the status of the family in the society. The US-sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that eugenic thinking had a direct impact on US-social policy in the interwar period to ensure the public health of the nation. According to Hill Collins, official family planning advice followed eugenic ideas.32 Women were central in the process of developing a new social policy with the focus on the family. Feminists, not only in the US but also in other Western countries, took part in the transformation of the role of the caring mother and wife in the private sphere to the mother of the nation or of the race.

Finnish Fanny Hult, chairwoman of the Finnish housewife organization Martha, argued that women want to contribute to their countries, more than they wanted ever before.33 From her point of view this contribution could be that housewives help other women to increase their household skills to improve their own home and the upbringing of their children. Martha-organization offered in Finland extensive information and education possibilities for unexperienced housewives, like cooking classes, information about cleanliness of the home, health care or help with household economy. The contribution of a woman to the society was defined through her status as wife, mother and housewife, not as independent, single, working woman. The independent, working of woman did not exist the horizon of Martha-organization and was not recognized as positive contributor to the society.

The position of the Martha-organization about the female role in the society must certainly be seen in the societal context of Finland. Finland was a latecomer, even in comparison to the other late Nordic countries and the overall Western development in industrialization and urbanization. The majority of the Finnish population lived also in the early twentieth century rather in a rural and agricultural environment than in an urban

31 TURDA, Modernism and Eugenics, pp. 59-60.
33 Fanny HULT: Föreningen Martha, Helsinki 1913, p. 3.
and industrial. Due to this the female role was stronger connected to the household than in more advanced industrialized societies, like Great Britain, for example. Employment for women outside the house was not so common yet. The agricultural structures provided employment for women in the house. Martha-organization was especially interested in rural women and with their work not only strengthened the female role as mother and housewife but also modernized the situation of the woman at home. They provided through their classes and their magazine Husmodern the most up-to-date information how to organize a modern household to Finnish women, which was very much at the heart of the interest of most women in Finland and also of the Finnish nation.

Yet, the maternal argumentation could not only be found in industrial under-developed countries, like Finland, but also or maybe even especially in already highly developed industrial countries like Germany and the United States. Here, the perception of women as mothers by feminists was much more concrete connected to the social problems arisen through the industrial development and the new positioning of women in the society. The German feminist Helene Stöcker was the leader of the German organization Bund für Mutterschutz (Union for the Protection of Mothers), which aimed for a stronger social recognition of motherhood, the integration of men into family tasks and the support of unmarried mothers. Stöcker was not undisputed among German feminists due to her open and radical approaches towards sexuality. However, she was certainly a central figure in the demand of German feminists for a higher societal recognition of mothers. She argued, in line with the first women’s movements, that motherhood must be recognized as productive work and mothers must be protected from poverty, for example through mother insurances. Social scientist Sabine Hastedt argues that Stöcker’s maternal feminism centralized the well-being of the mother and aimed for a higher social recognition of motherhood. She concludes that motherhood was transformed from a private to a public matter.

Nonetheless, Hastedt is certainly right in her argumentation but I think, it is also fruitful to look at this argumentation from a societal point of view and ask why it was important that motherhood received higher social recognition. The societal

36 Ibid., p. 191.
recognition of motherhood and the transformation of motherhood from being private to public, provided not only women with a higher acknowledgment of their maternal tasks but made also any kind of failure, in form of no children or defective children, a public matter. The Swedish physician Karolina Widerström argued that

“The woman has in herself given by mother nature what is the most crucial and greatest parts of the process of life, which results in the reproduction of the race.”

From Widerström’s point of view motherhood was a gift of nature and women’s possibility to contribute to a betterment of the race. The so-called “new woman”, the public, single, working woman, was understood as selfish from the biological point of view, because she declined the gift of nature.

However, that should not mean that reproduction should be unlimited and uncontrolled. Most feminists agreed on the idea that motherhood must be planned and considered as right as well as great responsibility for women. The Danish writer and feminist Thit Jensen reported in her lecture Frivilligt Moderskap about a woman she met in an institution for feeble-minded. Jensen claimed that this woman gave birth to twins in the institution. Both twins were also feeble-minded and cared for most of their lives in an institution. Later the twins also gave birth to defective children. Jensen argued that the mother indeed was longing for a defective child to secure financial support from the state. Also the Norwegian birth control activist Katti Anker Møller claimed that most women must be considered as reckless mothers.

The concern that women were reckless with their ability to procreate the race was a widespread concern of Western first-wave feminists. We have already seen early that the prominent feminist Margret Sanger advised working-class women not to have more than two children and also the examples above from the Nordic countries show

37 ”Kvinna har åt sig av vår moder naturen fått överlämnad den väsentliga och större parten av de livsprocesser, hvilka åstadkomma släktets forplantning The woman has in herself given by mother nature what is the most crucial and greatest parts of the process of life, which results in the reproduction of the race.” Karolina WIDERSTRÖM: Kvinnohygien I. De kvinnliga underrifssorgunen, ders förrättningar och yarid, Stockholm, P.A. Norstedt & Söner Förlag, 1899, p. 3
39 DEUTSCHER "Reproductive Politics", p. 228ff.
40 Thit JENSEN: Frivilligt Moderskab, Copenhagen, Jespersen & Pio, 1925, p. 33.
41 Katti ANKER MØLLER: Katti Anker Møller: en kvinnes sociale arbeide gjennem 30 år, Oslo 1928, p. 33.
that feminists were concerned that women might not be responsible with their reproductive function. Interesting here is that, although many feminists, like Helene Stöcker, though demanded more male impact within the traditional family but in case of illegitimate children the focus was entirely on the reckless or unexperienced mother.

*Men and Women in Eugenic Feminism*

This leads to the third topic in which eugenic feminists were interested; the role of men and women in the society. As seen in the following of this paper, eugenic feminists had a conceptually closed relationship to maternal feminists. The ideology overlapped in many ways. Women’s role was in the first place understood through their reproductive ability. Eugenic feminists used motherhood and female reproduction to demand a better societal positioning of women in the society but not for all women. Only women who were responsible with their ability and contributed to the betterment of the race should receive this privilege.

Nonetheless, of course also in the horizon of eugenic feminists, men were part of the society. The role of men recognized by eugenic feminists was an interesting one. Though in the previous discussion it might have appeared that eugenic feminists considered only women to be responsible for racial suicide and degeneration, it were indeed also eugenic feminists who demanded frequently to recognize the male responsibility in the population crisis. The British feminist Frances Swiney for example argued that in particular men were responsible for transmitting venereal diseases to their wives, which were in the early twentieth century considered as especially fatal to the race quality.\(^{42}\) Common sexual infections, like syphilis or gonorrhea, can lead to blindness and other disabilities among newborns. Swiney concluded that women should make eugenic considerations when choosing a male partner.\(^{43}\) Also British suffragette Christabel Pankhurst demanded that men were the main responsible for the degeneration. Their immoral behaviour and visits by prostitutes spread venereal diseases among their middle-class wives and their families.\(^{44}\) The Canadian feminist Nellie McClung saw the female destiny in saving, caring and helping. The man makes the wound, she argued, and the woman heals it.\(^{45}\)

\(^{42}\) VALVERDE, “Mother of the Race”, p. 12.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 12.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 13.
\(^{45}\) DEVEREUX: ”Nellie Mcclung”, p. 21.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman took a more diverse perception of the role of men and women in the society and in the racial struggle. She argues that mother love is an instinct existing long before a father feels any connection to fatherhood. According to Gilman mothers have a tireless desire to serve their children. Men are lacking this natural desire. However, in order to complete the process of evolution men must be able to suffer the same paternal sacrifice like mothers. This would release women from their economic dependencies and make them equal to men. But the process to complete the race must come from the women. Gilman explains that,

“it was not well for the race to have the conservative processes of life so wholly confined to the female, the male being a temporary agent in the reproduction and of no further use. (...) We needed most quality of coordination, the facility in union, the power to make and to save rather than to spend and to destroy. These were female qualities. Acting from his own nature, man could not manifest traits that he did not possess.”

Gilman demanded not that women should take over male roles but that the female quality of reproduction must have an equal status in society to male production to resolve the sex-economic relation. Only when motherhood was recognized as profession the thread of degeneration and decrease of the race can be defeated. Women and men can only be together with their joint abilities of producing and reproducing enter the highest stage of evolution. Yet, the inducement must be made by women and their active participation was needed resolve the race-harming sex-economic relation between man and woman and become equal partners, everyone by its own ability given by nature.

**Conclusion**

Eugenic feminism was not a straight forward ideology or movement but once shaped by various factors like the national setting, social standing of the feminists or the profession. Also the perception how a eugenic woman should be was diverse. However, they were joined in the idea that motherhood was a defining characteristic of a woman. Motherhood provided women with a great responsibility, because their reproductive ability was decisive for the betterment of the race. Yet, motherhood was lifted on a higher level, from

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47 Ibid., p. 129.
being a private to a public matter, even to being a patriotic cause. Woman contribute with their reproduction to the strengthening of the nation. Eugenic feminists argued in this context that women, who were responsible mothers, must be granted be equal civil rights to men to be able to fulfil their role as mother of the race to their fullest ability.

Still, eugenic feminists used this argumentation also to exclude other women from civil rights. Women were not a homogenous group. The ones being reckless with their reproductive ability were not obliged for equal rights. Often the liability for being a eugenic mother or not was not granted for an individual but in context of a group by using social categories, like class, education, age, sexuality or ability as decision-makers. Eugenic feminists used biological aspects which provided them with seemingly a higher credibility in science-based and expert-driven societies in the early twentieth century to argue for an enhancement of women’s rights, in particular the rights of mothers.

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48 TURDA: Modernism and Eugenics, p. 59.