

Press release

Women.Rights

From the Enlightenment to the present

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Fifty years on from the introduction of women's suffrage in Switzerland, a special exhibition looks at the struggle for human and civil rights for women, from the Enlightenment to the present day.

Paris, 26 August 1789: France's National Assembly issues the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This basic charter was influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, and set down for the first time the right to liberty, the right to property, the right to security and the right to resist oppression. The Declaration granted these rights to all people; specifically, however, it meant only free men, even though women had also fought for equal rights during the Revolution.

Around 50 years later, the modern federal Constitution came into force in Switzerland. It established legal equality for all Christian Swiss people, but it excluded women. One of the arguments put forward to support this stance was that only those who did military service had a right to participate in political life. As a result, the fledgling Swiss federal state disadvantaged women legally at all levels: in politics, in everyday life, in education and in the working world. Society still did not perceive 'woman' as a self-determining individual. Instead, she was always thought of in relation to a man: she was mother, wife, sister-in-law or daughter.

For a long time Swiss women were shut out of the political decision-making process and disadvantaged under civil law. The long struggle for political equality entered the picture in the last quarter of the 19th century. The road was paved with countless advances, failed ballots and demonstrations. In 1971 – precisely 50 years ago – voting rights for women finally became reality. Ten years later, women and men were given equal status in the

Constitution. The Federal Act on Gender Equality, which prohibited any form of discrimination in employment, followed in 1996.

The exhibition at the National Museum Zurich traces the struggle for women's rights in this country – a struggle that has been tailing off and reigniting for more than 200 years. In addition to significant items on loan from Swiss institutions, the exhibition also presents relevant objects and exhibits from international collections. Audio stations give a voice to scores of women from history, and invite visitors to 'listen in' on the debates and discussions of each particular era. Two major installations by the artist Pipilotti Rist form the start and end points of the exhibition, setting it within an artistic and installative framework.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Alexander Rechsteiner | Communication | Swiss National Museum.

T. +41 44 218 65 64 | Email: alexander.rechsteiner@nationalmuseum.ch