Women in Hesse

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A FRESH BREEZE in Women's Organizations was the title of a talk given recently in Wiesbaden by a leader of a Hessian women's group who had just returned from a cultural exchange visit to the United States. A "fresh breeze" is blowing these days through all types of women's activities in the German state of Hesse. In every county, new forces at work are encouraging an increasing number of women to interest themselves in public questions and to take the initiative in tackling problems which are of concern to the whole community.

The story of the Marburg School Building Association offers a good example. In the spring of 1951, the Parent-Teacher Association of Marburg became concerned about the serious shortage of space in their elementary schools. When the state government announced that it would give fiscal support to an expensive and relatively less-needed girl's high school, the reaction of the PTA, sparked by a leader of the city's Women's Association, was immediate and vigorous.

A CAMPAIGN WAS organized to raise money for a new elementary school. It featured an inspection of schools by parents, a main-street parade of children carrying posters reading "We need a New Elementary School," "For 76 Children Only ONE Room" and a public meeting in the market place. In the meantime, facts on building costs were busily gathered and a School Building Association organized.

Then came a drive for funds which included solicitations from individuals and special projects ranging from school plays to a sale in the market place of wild flowers that Marburg children had picked in nearby woods.

A total of DM 6,300 ($1,499.40) was collected, but the results went far beyond this. Within a few days, it was announced that the girls' high school project had been postponed. Later, the city gave the land for the proposed new elementary school, and the government of Hesse allocated DM 425,000 ($101,150) to finance it. The plans have now been approved by the city government and construction will be started soon.
Mrs. Rohtraut Schulz-Baesken, the woman who gave the project much of its initial impetus, was asked where she got the idea for putting it in motion. She replied that she did not know "exactly" but cited a number of ideas she had picked up in the past four or five years from meetings of women's organizations where foreign visitors and exchange returnees explained ways in which citizens organize to solve community problems in the United States, England and other democratic countries.

In the same way that the Marburg group's action blossomed into a striking demonstration of the power of the organized citizen, women throughout Hesse have been acting on new ideas and suggestions and have been demonstrating their desire and ability to play a more active part in public affairs. Two undertakings in the country of Hanau illustrate the kind of initiative they show in practical project planning.

As in many other cities, there has been an acute need in highly-industrialized Hanau for more kindergarten space for the children of working mothers. At the suggestion of the women's affairs specialist of the US resident office, a committee of women including a city councillor, the director of a vocational school, the head of the city youth office and some students came together to consider the problem.

Student members of the committee conducted a survey which revealed that 25 percent of Hanau children between the ages of six and 14 were without home care because their mothers worked. A three-way plan was worked out: to get contributions for a building fund from factory employers (since more than 40 percent of the women are employed in industrial plants); to ask the city for land and a regular contribution for maintenance; and to interest the Red Cross in acting as sponsor and meeting the rest of the operating costs.

To date DM 15,300 ($3,641.40) of the DM 35,000 ($8,330) needed for the building have been raised. The land is available. There is assurance that responsibility for operation and maintenance will be assumed by the Red Cross and the city. With this start, construction can begin. Plans, meanwhile, are underway for securing the remainder of the funds through gifts of construction materials, voluntary contributions of labor by apprentices, further cash donations from employers, benefit performances and other money-raising projects. But final success is assured all because of the careful planning and organizational work of a women's committee.

Similar thoughtful action brought success on a much smaller scale in a village of 123 inhabitants, not far from Hanau, where village children were unhappy because the five large windows of the one-room school had no shades. One window was given as a Christmas present from the village, but there was not enough money in the budget for the other four. Someone suggested the German-American Women's Club of Hanau as a source of help, but no one wanted to ask for a gift. So, 68 eggs contributed by village women were collected, and accompanied by a message from the children, were taken to the club for sale. The profit of DM 54 ($12.85) bought not only the four curtains but also four books for the school library.

These community self-help stories are typical of what is going on in many other counties of Hesse. Kindergarten projects are numerous. Others are: sewing centers, community centers and laundries, living centers for working women, systems for providing domestic assistance for working or sick mothers, the establishment of advisory centers for helping people find answers to pressing economic and social problems. Close to 60 activities have been completed or are underway, and money-raising campaigns are common.

One of the influences which has stimulated much of this community work has been the striking development of councils of women's organizations as mechanisms for coordinating the work of the different organizations.

The Women's Work Council of Hersfeld is a good illustration. In January 1950, representatives of 12 women's groups — welfare, church, civic, trade union, rural, refugee, housewives, political parties — established an informal clearing house for exchanging information. This body has developed three primary methods for effective work: coordinating action on projects of interest to all groups, serving as a medium for existing influence on city officials and acting as a source of stimulation on the educational programs of the member groups.

On the coordination side, the Hersfeld work-council groups cooperate on welfare projects and on the establishment of such community facilities as a playground, a kitchen where low-cost meals are served, and an advisory center for social and economic problems.

Valuable working relations with the city government have been established. For example, the women recently visited a housing exhibition in Hanover, and on their
return, they accompanied members of the local housing committee on an inspection of new dwellings. A follow-up step was appointment of a member of the Council to the housing committee. A result members of the Women's Work Council are almost certain to be invited to meetings where matters of general community concern are discussed. The Council resolutions furthermore may get a ready hearing from city government committees.

The technique of the Hersfeld Work Council in adult education is equally well developed. From time to time, a lecture is arranged on some subject of outstanding importance such as Communist and neo-Fascist propaganda, occupation costs, and American financial assistance to Germany and then each group is encouraged to hold individual meetings to discuss the same topic.

The growth of efficient patterns of cooperation among the women's groups through work councils has resulted in the establishment of similar councils in 26 counties in a two-year period.

ONE OF THE most popular and successful of the community projects undertaken by the women's councils has been the establishment of the advisory centers. In the past 15 months, 11 advisory centers have been set up.

These centers are staffed by qualified women doctors, lawyers and social workers on a volunteer basis, and consulting hours are established two or three half-days a week. Here one can get suggestions, for example, on how to find adequate housing, what to do for the delinquent child, how to straighten out questions about pensions and other social security rights, and what to do about separation of property in divorce cases. Rooms are usually donated by the city government and there is cooperation and support from most city offices.

A Service Bureau for Women's Organizations, established in October 1950 with the assistance of American grant-in-aid funds, has become an important clearing house for ideas and information, for the exchange of experience between one part of Hesse and another and for modest financial assistance to civic projects. The Bureau, headed by Mrs. Antje Lemke, has a professional staff of four, and is one unit of the Association for Increasing Citizen Participation in Public Affairs in Wiesbaden. The program features promotion of citizenship education, dissemination of non-partisan, factual information and direct assistance to women’s groups.

Each month a five-day course on “women as citizens” is held in cooperation with the Haus Schwalbach leadership training center. A total of 340 women have attended the first 12 courses, receiving practical information on a citizenship topic, such as city councils, school reform and parent-teacher cooperation, political economics and the housewife, or social welfare. In addition to this basic course, the Bureau has given assistance to local citizenship institutes for women. There have been 15 such courses in 13 counties in the past year.

STAFF MEMBERS provide field service to the counties, giving assistance to local groups and to individual women who have expressed an interest in community activity. Regular consultations and a packet of informational material are available to local leaders on request. Help has been given recently to committees working to establish Business and Professional Women’s Clubs to be affiliated with the new German Federation of Business and Professional Women. As a result, five such clubs have come into existence in Hesse.

The Bureau has also provided speakers to strengthen the quality of civic education programs. In the past year approximately 200 speakers have been made available in 29 counties. At the present time, the Service Bureau is giving financial assistance in 11 counties for seven advisory centers, three work councils and three local news bulletins, as well as the headquarters of one state-wide women’s organization.

The Bureau acts as a center for the distribution of factual information on public issues. A bimonthly bulletin,
"Information for Women" has, until recently, been published and distributed to 4,000 Hessian women and 6,000 women in other parts of western Germany. Work-kits are prepared to meet special needs, such as material for planning activities that will increase the amount of informed participation in local elections.

The local US resident offices have assisted the civic work of women in Hesse. In 23 of these offices young German assistants have devoted either part or full time to the promotion of women's citizen participation. In many counties, the resident officers' wives have also devoted regular time to the work.*

A NEW "Homemobile" has brought a special form of help to rural areas. With an instructor in charge, this exhibit on household management and improvements traveled to 18 communities in the past six months. Reports from the counties indicate two trends which reflect in part the result of work carried on at the local level: in 26 counties many new groups, especially housewives organizations, farm women's organizations and independent women's organizations and independent women's clubs, have been established and in 19 counties, increase in the civic content of women's programs in some 30 to 40 organizations has been reported.

Mrs. Erna Schlepper, new executive secretary of the Hessian Women's Civic Association, recently returned from a study visit in the United States, and is adapting ideas she saw applied there. Another exchangee, member of the organization's board, is concerned with the farm women's place in the community and is working for closer relations between city women and farm women.

In Hanau, two members of the committee which planned the kindergarten project were exchangees. A woman who is both leader of the housewives' association and a member of the city council in another Hessian city reports that her organization has increased membership from 90 to 248


WHAT OF THE assumption of citizen responsibility on political issues? Progress here is also measurable but quite naturally comes a bit more slowly than in community work on social questions. There are, however, a number of heartening developments.

More than a year ago, the Communists tried to organize women's circles in Hesse and to disrupt other women's groups. They got nowhere. Communist-inspired groups are of no significance in Hesse and the Communists have been excluded from the work councils and women's associations.

There has been steady increase in the number of communities where women's groups have been able to influence public officials. In Darmstadt, for example, 13 organizations working together found that they could get a promise of city support for more kindergartens, whereas one group alone had not even received an answer to its letter. In Kassel, the women discovered that when they combined forces, the city administration moved ahead on badly needed repairs in refugee barracks. This not only proved a way for getting action but also gave reality to the Women's Work Council in that city. It led to further success in having the city improve administrative arrangements for paying unemployment benefits.

With success in so many fields of community activities, self-confidence is growing among Hessian women, and this is an important adjunct to their efforts to become truly responsible citizens.

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Japanese Woman Leader Visits Germany

Taki Fujita, director of the Japanese Government's women's affairs bureau, was in Germany during April to consult with HICOG and West German women leaders and to study problems and working conditions of German women.

Miss Fujita, who is the highest woman appointee within the Japanese Government, conferred with Mrs. Mildred Allport, HICOG women's affairs adviser, and visited several factories in the Frankfurt region.

In Stuttgart, Miss Fujita consulted with Mrs. Anna Haag, German writer and lecturer; in Karlsruhe, she spoke before a panel workshop on women's problems; and in Berlin, she met Mayor Ernst Reuter, women and trade union leaders. She returned to Tokyo following brief visits in Zurich, Switzerland, and Rome.

Miss Fujita's trip to Germany was sponsored by the Women's Affairs Staff of HICOG's Division of Cultural Relations.

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Miss Fujita, left, conferred in Berlin with Mrs. Louise Schroeder, who is one of the foremost women leaders in Germany and was acting mayor of former capital city during the Soviet blockade in 1948-49. (HICOG-Berlin photo)