

THE MODERN CITY AND THE MUNICIPAL FRANCHISE FOR WOMEN 1906

----- *Jane Addams* -----

Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a pioneering reformer who dedicated her life to improving the living and working conditions of immigrants living in poverty in large cities. Addams also campaigned for woman suffrage, believing that women’s votes would help further the passage of laws designed to improve social conditions. This speech, delivered at the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) convention of 1906, focused on this very issue. In recognition of her lifetime achievements, Addams was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

What is Addam’s argument, and do you support it? Why or why not?

It has been well said that the modern city is a stronghold of industrialism quite as the feudal city was a stronghold of militarism, but the modern cities fear no enemies and rivals from without and their problems of government are solely internal. Affairs for the most part are going badly in these great new centres, in which the quickly-congregated population has not yet learned to arrange its affairs satisfactorily. Unsanitary housing, poisonous sewage, contaminated water, infant mortality, the spread of contagion, adulterated food, impure milk, smoke-laden air, ill-ventilated factories, dangerous occupations, juvenile crime, unwholesome crowding, prostitution and drunkenness are the enemies which the modern cities must face and overcome, would they survive. Logically their electorate should be made up of those who can bear a valiant part in this arduous contest, those who in the past have at least attempted to care for children, to clean houses, to prepare foods, to isolate the family from moral dangers; those who have traditionally taken care of that side of life which inevitably becomes the subject of municipal consideration and control as soon as the population is congested. To test the elector’s fitness to deal with this situation by his ability to bear arms is absurd. These problems must be solved, if they are solved at all, not from the military point of view, not even from the industrial point of view, but from a third,

which is rapidly developing in all the great cities of the world—the human-welfare point of view....

City housekeeping has failed partly because women, the traditional housekeepers, have not been consulted as to its multiform activities. The men have been carelessly indifferent to much of this civic housekeeping, as they have always been indifferent to the details of the household....The very multifariousness and complexity of a city government demand the help of minds accustomed to detail and variety of work, to a sense of obligation for the health and welfare of young children and to a responsibility for the cleanliness and comfort of other people. Because all these things have traditionally been in the hands of women, if they take no part in them now they are not only missing the education which the natural participation in civic life would bring to them but they are losing what they have always had.

Source: “The Modern City and the Municipal Franchise for Women” by Jane Addams. Reprinted in *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage*, edited by Mari Jo and Paul Buhle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 371.