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Mr. KEIR HARDIE, M.P.

ON

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

MR. KEIR HARDIE, M.P., speaking at a Meeting held to welcome the Deputation of Women Textile Workers from Lancashire and Yorkshire, at the Chelsea Town Hall, on February 18th, 1902, said:—

“I am sure we shall all join in welcoming the deputation of working women to-night. I have nothing but praise for those middle and upper class women who have worked so zealously in one direction and another in order to acquire the Franchise for their sex, but I am sure I shall carry conviction when I say that without the active support and co-operation of working women they will have no chance whatever of being successful. There are still those who are opposed to the Franchise being extended to women, those who linger under that old tradition, that in some respects or another, woman is either so much superior to man as to be beyond the need of political

power, or so much inferior to man as to be incapable of using it. I happen to occupy the mean position between these two extremes.

“My experience informs me that in all matters that appertain to the life of the community, women, like men, are part of the human stock. No reason can be adduced, which can justify the withholding from women of that political power which men have won for themselves. The question, I respectfully submit, is as much a man's question as it is a woman's question.

“Mr. Bell was speaking about the way which women are used to bring down wages. How far are men responsible for that fact? Treat the woman as an inferior and she will play the part, if only in self-defence. If men say to women: ‘Thou art inferior to me,’ then the woman has no option but to make war upon the man, unconsciously it may be, but still actively, until he has learnt his lesson. By treating women—I am speaking now from the working-class point of view—as equals, by conceding to them every concession which men claim for themselves, the women will play the part of the equal, not only in regard to wages, but in all other matters appertaining to industrial life. So this question of the Franchise is as much a man's question as a woman's question, because, as has been pointed out, the possession of the Franchise itself would give women a new standing, a new increase of

power, and would enable them to win for themselves concessions which are to-day withheld. But it is more than a man's question, it is a national question!

“So long as there lies at the root, at the basis, of society a large section of people—whether men or women matters not—who are not treated as fully-developed human beings, so long will this section act as a drag upon every class in the scale of society. Low-paid workers prevent high-paid workers from rising higher in the scale, and in like manner, the condition of all classes in society is to be measured from the condition of those who form the lowest, the weakest, and the most helpless.

“Therefore the question is one of national importance. More than that, the woman who is a drudge only, will produce sons unworthy of the fathers who have gone before them, but the woman who is not a drudge, and who respects herself, will, though perhaps unconsciously, exert a noble and inspiring influence upon her children. Therefore the question is a national question.

“What are the objections? There are several, but I will only name two. One of the chief objections to the political enfranchisement of women is that it would be a menace to progress; that the woman is so much under the influence of her clerical advisers that she would be influenced to vote as priest or parson might dictate.

“It is a common supposition that the priest and parson are not exactly in the van of progress. I have this reply. I admit that a very large section of women would be influenced in the exercise of their voting power by the opinion of their clerical adviser, but an equal number of men are influenced in the exercise of their voting power by the publican and book-maker, and, on the whole, I prefer the influence of the priest and parson.

“Secondly, it is said that giving the Franchise to married women would lead to domestic discord, to strife between husband and wife whose political opinions may happen to differ. The logical conclusion of that objection is that in order that the lord and master of creation may enjoy domestic peace the wife should be treated as an inferior domestic animal! How do women enjoy this prospect?

“And so it gives me much pleasure to move the resolution and express a hope that the result of the deputation coming to London will be to give a stimulus and impetus to the movement for the enfranchisement of women, because only when all men and all women are fully-enfranchised citizens can the old dream of the pioneers of reform—the Government of the free, by the free, for the free—come ever to be realised.”