

At the opening of the debate there was placed before the Committee a motion by the Irish delegation which, after stating that the status of women was a question which should engage the attention of the League, recommended that the question, with reference particularly to the Equal Rights Treaty, should be referred to Governments and women's organizations for comments for submission to the Seventeenth Assembly. To give an account of the debate would be but to repeat much that has been said on the allied subject of the nationality of women. The speakers included a representative of the International Labour Office, who expressed the view that questions affecting labour should be dealt with by his organization. There was considerable opposition to the Irish motion, although there appeared to be no objection to Governments being asked to state their views. There is, of course, wide diversity as between the different countries, the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, with some others, having the most progressive legislation.

The Belgian representative made an interesting but a rather trenchant speech, and then submitted a motion which suggested that the question of equality of civil and political rights could advantageously be examined by the League of Nations only when the League had before it the question of the rights of man and of the citizen. Doubtless the women of the advanced countries (and even these show considerable diversity) wish to see the rights they enjoy conferred on the women of countries the legislation of which is not advanced. It does not always follow, however, that these rights could be easily assimilated. Even in the countries in which there is equality as between the sexes the growth of freedom has been slow. In Britain, even, it is only in recent years that a woman has had complete liberty to dispose as she likes of her property. In one European country at least, without whose culture the world would be much the poorer, women do not enjoy the franchise, nor do they appear to be greatly anxious to possess it. It is to a great extent a question of manners, customs, and national feeling. Much can be done by international organizations to make known various efforts towards change and progress, but perhaps the League, composed as it is of Governments, is hardly the body to take charge of a matter which affects national life very closely.

We in New Zealand are proud of our enlightened outlook in the matter of the franchise and equality of the sexes. But it must be remembered that we are a new country, unhampered by certain customs and traditions which have a deep foundation elsewhere.

At the end of the debate the Chairman suggested that the representatives of Belgium, France, and the Irish Free State should draft a motion which should take account of the views which had been expressed. As the result of the collaboration of the representatives of these three countries a motion, expressed in the following terms, was laid before the Committee, which recommended its adoption by the Assembly.

“ The Assembly—

“ Noting that the question of the status of women was placed on the agenda of the present session for examination, at the instance of a number of delegations, with particular reference to the Equal Rights Treaty signed at Montevideo on December 26th, 1933, by representatives of the Governments of Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay;

“ Considering that the terms of the Equal Rights Treaty should be examined in relation to the existing political, civil, and economic status of women under the laws of the countries of the world;

“ Recognizing that the question of conditions of employment, whether of men or women, is a matter which properly falls within the sphere of the International Labour Organization:

“ (1) Decides that the question of the political and civil status of women shall be referred by the Secretary-General to the Governments for their observations, including observations as to the action which in their view the League might take in this matter, and that the Governments shall be requested to supply to the Secretary-General, together with their observations, information as to the existing political and civil status of women under their respective national laws;

“ (2) Recommends that the women's international organizations should continue their study of the whole question of the political and civil status of women;

“ (3) Requests that the observations and information communicated by the Governments and the statements of the said international organizations shall be sent to the Secretary-General for consideration by the Assembly of the League of Nations at a subsequent session;

“ (4) Expresses the hope that the International Labour Organization will, in accordance with its normal procedure, undertake an examination of those aspects of the problem within its competence—namely, the question of equality under labour legislation—and that it will, in the first place, examine the question of legislation which effects discriminations, some of which may be detrimental to women's right to work.”

The Assembly passed it at its meeting on the 27th September.

Paragraph 1 of the effective part of the resolution is the only section which concerns the Government. No doubt in due course you will receive a request to supply information. I should be glad if a copy of the Government's reply could be forwarded to me. It is only on the legal aspect of the question that Government action is desired—that is, to supply information regarding the laws of New Zealand as they affect the political and civil status of women (Document A. 60).