YOU HAVE asked me what I think of the feminist movement and what will be the consequences of the present war for it.

One of the first effects of the war has certainly been to give quite a new aspect to the question. The futility of the perpetual oppositions between men and women was at once made clearly apparent, and behind the conflict of the sexes, only relating to exterior facts, the gravity of the circumstances allowed the discovery of the always existent, if not always outwardly manifested fact, of the real collaboration, of the true union of these two complementary halves of humanity.

Many men were surprised to see how easily women could replace them in most of the posts they occupied before, and to their surprise was added something of regret not to have found sooner a real partner of their work and their struggles in her whom more often they had only considered as an object of pleasure and distraction, or at best as the guardian of their hearth and mother of their children. Certainly woman is that and to be it well requires exceptional qualities, but she is not only that, as the present circumstances have amply proved.

In going to tend the wounded in the most difficult material conditions, actually under the enemy’s fire, the so-called weak sex has proved that its physical energy and power of endurance were equal to those of man. But where, above all, women have given proof of exceptional gifts is in their organising faculties. These faculties of administration were recognised in them long ago by the Brahmanic India of before the Mohammedan conquest. There is a popular adage there which says: “Property governed by woman means prosperous property.” But in the Occident Semitic thought allied to Roman legislation has influenced
customs too deeply for women to have the opportunity of showing their capacity for organisation.

It is true that in France one frequently sees the woman absolute mistress of the administration of her house even from the pecuniary point of view, and the proverbial riches of the French petite bourgeoisie proves that the system has a good side. It was rare however to see the feminine faculties utilised to direct undertakings of great importance, and until now the confidential posts of public administration had always been closed to them. The present war has shown that in refusing the co-operation of women the governments deprived themselves of precious help. I will cite you an event as example.

A few months after the outbreak of the war, when the Germans had almost entirely occupied the Belgian territory, the inhabitants of the invaded regions were in indescribable misery. Fortunately, thanks to the initiative of several rich American men and women, a Society was founded to supply the most urgent needs of the sorely tried populations. As the result of certain military operations a fairly large group of small villages were suddenly deprived of all food. Famine was imminent. The American Society sent a message to some similar English Societies asking that five vans of the most indispensable supplies should be dispatched immediately. These vans must reach their destination in three days. The men to whom this request was addressed replied that it was quite impossible to comply with it. Luckily a woman heard of the matter. It seemed terrible to her that in such tragic circumstances one could use the word “impossible”. She belonged to a group of women who aided the wounded and sufferers of the war. Immediately they promised the American Society they would satisfy it and in three days the numerous obstacles were overcome though some of the difficulties, especially those concerning transport, seemed truly unsurmountable. A powerful organising mind, an ardent will, had done the miracle; the provisions arrived in time and the dreadful misery of famine was thus avoided.
This is not to say that only woman’s exceptional qualities have been revealed by the present war. Her weaknesses, her faults, her pettiness have also been given the opportunity of display, and certainly if women wish to take the place they claim in the governing of nations they must progress much further in the mastery of self, the broadening of ideas and points of view, in intellectual suppleness and oblivion of their sentimental preferences in order to become worthy of the management of public affairs.

It is certain that purely masculine politics have given proof of incapacity; they have foundered too often in their search of strictly personal interest, and in their arbitrary and violent action. Doubtless women’s politics would bring about a tendency to disinterestedness and more humanitarian solutions. But unfortunately, in their present state, women in general are creatures of passion and enthusiastic partisanship; they lack the reasoning calm that purely intellectual activity gives; the latter is undoubtedly dangerous because hard and cold and pitiless, nevertheless it is unquestionably useful to master the overflow of sentiment which cannot hold a predominant place in the ruling of collective interests.

These faults which would be serious if the activity of women had to replace that of men, could form, on the contrary, by a collaboration of the two sexes, an element of compensation for the opposite faults of men. That would be the best means of leading them gradually to mutual perfecting. To reduce the woman’s part to solely interior and domestic occupations, and the man’s part to exclusively exterior and social occupations, thus separating what should be united, would be to perpetuate the present sad state of things, from which both are equally suffering. It is in front of the highest duties and heaviest responsibilities that their respective qualities must unite in a close and confident solidarity.

Is it not time that this hostile attitude of the two sexes facing one another as irreconcilable adversaries should cease? A severe, a painful lesson is being given to the nations. On the ruins piled
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up now, new constructions more beautiful and more harmonious can be erected. It is no longer the moment for frail competitions and self-interested claims; all human beings, men or women, must associate in a common effort to become conscious of the highest ideal which asks to be realised and to work ardently for its realisation. The question to be solved, the real question is then not only that of a better utilisation of their outer activities, but above all that of an inner spiritual growth. Without inner progress there is no possible outer progress.

Thus the problem of feminism, as all the problems of the world, comes back to a spiritual problem. For the spiritual reality is at the basis of all others; the divine world, the Dhammata of Buddhism, is the eternal foundation on which are built all the other worlds. In regard to this Supreme Reality all are equal, men and women, in rights and in duties; the only distinction which can exist in this domain being based on the sincerity and ardour of aspiration, on the constancy of the will. And it is in the recognition of this fundamental spiritual equality that can be found the only serious and lasting solution for this problem of the relation of the sexes. It is in this light that it must be placed, it is at this height that must be sought the focus of action and new life, around which will be constructed the future temple of Humanity.

7 July 1916