

The History of Feminism: Suffragettes in Britain



Barbara Bodichon Bessie Rayner Parkes Mrs Millicent Fawcett



Christabel Pankhurst Annie Kenney Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence



Mary Wollstonecraft Charles Bradlaugh

Introduction

Women's suffrage was a crucial step to women achieving the rights we have today. Women during the time did not have equal rights to men and were often undermined and not allowed to do certain/most things men did which drove them to this long lasting protest. But the question is what was the suffragette movement and how did it shape society to be how it is today?

Fight for Rights

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote 'The Vindication of The Rights Of Women'. In the book, she expressed her discomfort towards societal standards and the disregarding of women's education. Mary voices how women were perceived to be weak therefore unfit to have schooling and to only pursue housework and parenting. She argued in her book that the recommendation on women's rights did not follow through as suggested. In her words,

“Therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked,”

Meaning that the importance of recognising and coming to terms with the educational and societal challenges of women should not be ignored, rather to for education and society to improve so that it is not focused on beauty over strength and intelligence.

Forwarding to the 1800s, feminism became more organised like the Longham palace circle with its leaders being Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes. It campaigned for Women Rights in employment, law, marriage and education in 1850. A year later a petition for women's suffrage was hosted by the Sheffield Female Political Association for the House of Lords. The association managed to persuade Lord Carlisle to submit the petition. The association also managed to write multiple newspapers and attended meetings which allowed their word to spread across Britain. This encouraged other areas in Britain to start their own suffrage groups, giving women the chance to push even further to their goal of equality.

1903 October 10th, a new organisation named 'Women's Social and Political Union' made its way into the women's suffrage by demanding votes for women. Before the W.S.P.U was established, women's suffrage was mainly led by Mrs Millicent Fawcett with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies which was founded in 1897. N.U.W.S.S mainly strived for votes for women in more modest, peaceful and legal means while the W.S.P.U strived for the same thing in a more direct, demanding and revolutionary manner.

The W.S.P.U made a three-word slogan in Manchester, 'Deeds not Words'. This slogan represents how, instead of being calmer with ways like the N.U.W.S.S, they needed to take physical action to be heard because just putting signs up on the street wasn't enough for them to be recognised, as a gentle approach of activism had no result. Christabel Pankhurst wanted change and as fast as possible:

"the vote question must be settled. Mine was third generation of women to claim the vote and the vote must be obtained. To go on helplessly pleading was undignified. Strong and urgent demand was needed. Success must be hastened."

The quote states how the N.U.W.S.S's gentle pleading was demeaning and how it needed to be taken to further measures. It shows that the gentle approach wasn't working and a radical approach was needed to change the status quo.

The politicians came with ideas of further improvement with the Great Reform Act of 1832, but it did not satisfy the women's movement. To respond to the act under Christabel Pankhurst, they demanded further addition to the act to include women in societal issues and to grant them equal rights.

What was the Great Reform Act?

The Great Reform Act was a new law established in 1832. It allowed more people to become a representative in parliament and growing industrial towns like Manchester also allowing some (wealthier) women the ability to vote

Although many people were left without the right to vote, this was a big step forward into modern democracy.

The downside to this is that, because only women with high status or wealth were allowed to vote, women of lower status and/or less fortunate wouldn't be given the right to vote in elections. This led to Ms Pankhurst's campaign being a response to this unfair treatment.

The W.S.P.U demonstrated their promotional approach among many militant protests as the first. Christabel and a mill girl, Anne Kennedy, chose to have a meeting held by the Liberal politicians Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey in Manchester, 13th of October 1905. Because of their radical interruptions and persistent questions, they were ejected from the meeting, and they continued to protest outside. This led to them being sent to Strangeways prison. Their actions today may be seen as normal but back then it would be portrayed as unfeminine and troublesome, as society strictly perceived women's role in household matters.

In 1906, the union moved to London where they opened a national headquarters. Fredrick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence funded the office accommodation while it was still new. By 1912, 58 branches existed around the country welcoming women from different backgrounds and occupations. Membership lists were not kept in case of police raids. Marketing was first used politically by the W.S.P.U, creating their campaign brand with colours such purple, white and green. These colours represented things like freedom, purity and hope.

Many powerful politicians opposed the suffragettes so having allies from the liberal party was very helpful. The liberal politicians (like Charles Bradlaugh) showed a lot of support to women's suffrage by voting for the conciliation bills (to grant a measure of women's suffrage) throughout 1910 - 1912.

The conciliation bills collapsed due to the anti-feminist president refusing to pass the bills around parliament. This was the trigger that prompted

the W.S.P.U into sanctioning extreme militancy which marked the final 2 years of the campaign until WW1 broke out.

The organisations 'Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement of 1910' and 'Men's League for Women's Suffrage' both supported the idea of women voting rights. The men who supported and/or were in these organisations were labelled as 'sex traitors' and were treated with violence and disrespect.

The W.S.P.U was determined to force the government to give women the vote, but the establishment just as stubbornly denied it.

This led to over a thousand British suffragettes acquiring a criminal record and being imprisoned. This shows us how the suffragettes were refused the title of political prisoners and were treated as 'common criminals'. In protest, they went on a hunger strike in the prison leading them to be force fed with terrible consequences for their health. The W.S.P.U awarded women who went through with the torture, stating how people who had chosen to undergo starvation and hardships in order to get their point across should be acknowledged and how a great principle of political justice had been vindicated. Women's roles after WW1 showed that they could be as important as men in production, agricultural work, and in other fields. After the war, in 1918, the 'Representation of The People Act' was enacted, granting women over the age of 30 the ability to vote in elections. Further into 1919, the 'Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act' was allowing women to take a seat in parliament, Nancy Astor being the first woman in the House of Commons. In the subsequent decades the law had been enacted/changed in favour of more equal rights between men and women.

In summary, the suffragettes were willing to do anything for their rights. Gentle pleading to extreme lengths like starvation proved their never surrendering spirit and need for equality. The women and men who participated in these protests with their undying spirit just goes to show what we as humans can achieve if we persist.

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