The Movement for Women’s Suffrage

1850’s - 1928
Women’s Status in Society

In the mid-1800’s women were regarded as ‘second-class’ citizens with few rights and few opportunities to improve their lowly status in society. It was generally thought that women’s brains were smaller than men’s and that women were incapable of understanding the important issues of the day. Women faced discrimination in almost every area of society.

Women in the Workplace

The industrial Revolution created new opportunities for women. According to the 1851 census, women made up 33% of the workforce, but most worked in ‘sweated industries’ (right), in low-paid menial jobs in the factories and mills or in domestic service. They worked long hours in unpleasant, often dangerous conditions. Without Trade Union representation, women had little protection from the exploitation of their male employers.

Women and Domestic Law

"WIFE: How am I supposed to feed the children and pay the rent?"
"HUSBAND: Shut up! It is no concern of yours what I do with your wages!"
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In marriage, women had no rights and were effectively the ‘property’ of their husbands. By law, a married woman’s earnings and property belonged to her husband. When Mrs Millicent Fawcett, who became the leader of the Suffragists, had her purse stolen, the thief was charged with ‘stealing the property of Henry Fawcett’. It was almost impossible for a woman to win a divorce even on the grounds of cruelty. In the event of the husband seeking a divorce the wife could expect to lose everything including the children.

Women and Education

This was not considered a priority. Working class girls received little or no education but were trained for a lifetime of work in the factories or domestic service. Some received basic reading and writing skills through Sunday Schools which reinforced traditional values (including the status of women). Middle class girls were often taught at home by private tutors. Their education was geared towards being good wives and homemakers. Some girls attended boarding school but only a few could expect to go on to further education.

The Right to Vote

This was the main driving force behind the female suffrage campaign. It was believed that women would simply ‘waste’ their vote as they had no understanding of politics and were ‘too emotional’. If women got involved in politics, it would destabilize family life and undermine the very fabric of society. Despite the formation of numerous female suffrage groups and a growing sympathy towards the ‘cause’, the only concession came in 1869 when some women were allowed to vote in local government elections. In the major reform acts of 1867 and 1884 women were ignored altogether.

Questions:

1. Describe the status of women in British society during the early 1800’s.

2. What were working conditions like for the majority of women?

3. In what ways did domestic laws discriminate against women?
4. How much emphasis was put on education for:
   a) working class girls   b) middle class girls

5. What arguments were put forward against women being given the vote?

The Women’s Suffrage Movements

The first Female Reform Society emerged around the time of Peterloo in 1819; by the 1830’s a number of women’s suffrage groups supported the Chartists’ campaign. Although the People’s Charter did not include women, they believed that extending the vote to working class men was a step in the right direction.

In 1865, eleven well-connected women including influential suffragists such as Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett formed the Kensington Society in London. The women had been frustrated in their attempts to pursue a career in education and medicine. It was decided to draft a petition asking Parliament to grant women the vote. The women took their petition to Henry Fawcett and John Stuart Mill, two MPs who supported universal suffrage. Mill believed that:

‘...the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes — the legal subordination of one sex to the other — is wrong, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement.’

Mill added an amendment to the 1867 Reform Act that would give women the same political rights as men. The amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73.

John Stuart Mill,

Millicent Fawcett
After this setback, the London Society for Women's Suffrage was formed. Soon, similar societies began to
emerge across the country. In 1887, seventeen of these groups joined together to form the NUWSS (National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies).

The N.U.W.S.S.

Under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett, the NUWSS (Suffragists) were a well-connected, well-organised group who campaigned peacefully, always within the law. They held public meetings, organised petitions, wrote letters to politicians, published newspapers and distributed free literature. They also produced novels and plays on the issue of votes for women. By 1914, the NUWSS had 500 local branches and over 100,000 members. In 1908, the NUWSS organized massive demonstrations in London in support of women’s suffrage. Elizabeth Robins described one of the demonstrations:

‘On June 21\textsuperscript{st}, the NUWSS marched through crowded streets from Embankment to the Albert Hall. Under the chairmanship of Mrs. Fawcett, a mass meeting was held of such size and enthusiasm as had seldom being equaled. The Daily Chronicle said:

"Never has so vast a throng gathered in London to witness an outlay of political force."

Fawcett believed that it was important that the NUWSS campaigned for a wide variety of causes to win the respect of men. This included campaigns against slave trafficking, child labour and the exploitation of low paid workers. These tactics succeeded in gaining considerably sympathy from men, including a growing number of MP’s, but although the Suffragists achieved considerable success in improving the status of women, their methods were too moderate to force the main issue of votes for women.

An NUWSS poster showing the wide variety of issues on which the Suffragists campaigned
1. When did support for female suffrage in Britain begin?

2. What was the Kensington Society and why was it so influential?

3. How much support was there among MP’s for John Stuart Mill’s amendment to the 1866 Reform Bill?

4. Describe a) the origins of the NUWSS b) their methods

5. Why did the NUWSS campaign on a wide range of issues?

6. Why were they ultimately unsuccessful in winning the vote?

## Successes of the Suffragists

### Improvement in Working Conditions

The Trade Union Movement began in the 1820’s but women were largely excluded. Most men were opposed to women joining trade unions as they saw female membership as a possible threat to male jobs and earnings.

Female trade unionism took off in the 1870’s among textile workers in the large mills of the north-east. In 1874, the Women's Trade Union League was formed. The League helped raise awareness of the dreadful conditions many female workers faced. In 1875, the first female delegate attended the annual Trade Union Congress but women still struggled to be accepted in male dominated unions.

During the Match Girl’s Strike in 1889, the Women’s Trade Union League organised funds to support the strikers and negotiated a successful outcome. It was a major step forward for the women’s movement and paved the way for closer links with the men’s Trade Unions. By 1914, female membership had grown from 20,000 in the 1870’s to almost 500,000.
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In 1909, Trade Boards were set up which regulated wages and ensured a minimum payment for male and female workers. The advent of new technology such as the typewriter and the telephone also helped to create new office-based jobs for women in pleasant working environments. Leading suffragists like Margaret Bondfield (the first female Cabinet Minister) continued to campaign for better pay and conditions but by 1914, women’s wages were still some way behind those of men.

Improvements in Domestic Legislation

Suffragists campaigned vigorously against the unfair domestic laws of the 1800’s. Marriage was a popular institution in Victorian Britain, but often meant the end of any kind of independent lifestyle for women. Traditionally, a woman was expected to be subservient to her husband. Her wealth and property as well as any earnings passed to the husband following marriage.

‘His Latest Purchase’: a postcard illustrating the inequality of marriage in Victorian Britain

The Matrimonial Causes Acts of 1857 and 1873 gave women some additional rights such as access to children following a divorce and the ability to keep some of their earnings, however, as Millicent Fawcett pointed out:

‘a man can obtain the dissolution of the marriage if he can prove one act of infidelity on the part of his wife; but a woman cannot get her marriage dissolved unless she can prove that her husband has been guilty both of infidelity and cruelty’.

Progress came in 1870 with the Married Women’s Property Act, which allowed women to keep their earnings up to a maximum of £200 per year. In 1882, an amendment to the Act allowed women to keep their earnings and property without limit. By the outbreak of World War 1, women had gained further legal rights such as the ability to sue for divorce on the grounds of cruelty or negligence and to claim maintenance of up to £2 per week.

These reforms meant that women were no longer forced to ‘suffer in silence’ and gained a measure of independence and financial security that would previously have been unthinkable.
Questions:

1. Why was it difficult for women to join Trade Unions?

2. In what ways did women’s trade unionism take off in the 1870’s?

3. Why was the Match Girl’s Strike an important landmark for women?

4. What further improvements in working conditions took place before 1914?

5. Summarise the changes in domestic legislation that helped improve women’s lives from 1857 - 1914.

Advances in Education & Medicine

Before 1870, the idea of women following a professional career in law or medicine was unthinkable. Further education was a closed door for most women, although the founding of Queens College, London, in 1848 as a training institute for female teachers was an important first step. The Education Act of 1870 was also a significant landmark. Education became compulsory for all children regardless of sex up to the age of 12. Suffragists like Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson were among the first women to take their place on school boards as a result of the Act.

Emily Davies dismissed the traditional view of girls’ education as a preparation for motherhood. She had been denied the university education enjoyed by her three brothers and wrote a book called ‘The Higher Education of Women’. In 1874, she founded Girton College, Cambridge, to enable girls to study for careers in the professions. Gradually, most universities began to admit small numbers of women but it was not until 1948 that Cambridge finally accepted female graduates.
There remained a great deal of opposition to the idea of female doctors; medical schools attached to the universities refused to admit women. Scottish Universities were generally more welcoming, but when Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson, the older sister of Millicent Fawcett, applied to study medicine at Aberdeen in 1863 she received the following reply:

‘I must decline to give you instruction in anatomy… I have a strong conviction that the entrance of ladies into operating theatres is undesirable in every respect, and highly unbecoming. Ladies would make bad doctors at the best, and they do so many things excellently that I for one should be sorry to see them trying to do this one.’

After several rejections, Garrett-Anderson attended the University of Paris where she passed the required examinations. The British Medical Register, however, refused to recognize her degree. In 1872 she joined Sophia Jex-Blake to establish the London Medical School for Women.

Jex-Blake, a graduate of Queens College, persuaded Edinburgh University to allow her to attend medical lectures. At first, Jex-Blake and two other female students received a hostile reception:

‘On the afternoon of Friday 18th November 1870, we walked to the surgeon's hall, where the anatomy examination was to be held. We walked up to the gates, which remained open until we came within a yard of them, when they were slammed in our faces by a number of young men.’

Despite passing her exams, Jex-Blake was unable to graduate. Her case was taken up by sympathetic MP’s and in 1876 the law was changed to allow women to qualify as doctors. Jex-Blake graduated the following year. She then returned to Edinburgh and set up a medical practice while remaining a leading campaigner in the Suffragist movement.

Improvements in female education led to calls for women to be given the vote. Suffragists argued that if women were capable of becoming doctors, surely they were
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also capable of exercising the right to vote. By 1900, there were around 200 female doctors but very few women entered other professions such as law, accountancy, banking and engineering before the outbreak of World War 1.

Questions:

1. What improvements in female education took place in: a) 1848  b) 1870

2. Why was Emily Davies an important figure in improving female education?

3. What do the experiences of Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake suggest about male attitudes towards female doctors?

4. How did they help open the door to women for a career in medicine?

5. To what extent had women made genuine progress towards following careers in the professions by 1914?

Female Militancy

In 1903, members of the NUWSS formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabelle and Sylvia, the WSPU was unwilling to restrict itself to the peaceful methods favoured by the NUWSS. The Suffragette motto was 'Deeds not Words' and unlike the NUWSS, they campaigned on a single issue: 'Votes for Women'.

‘The Suspect’: Punch (1909)

Following the election of the Liberals in 1906 hopes were high that women’s suffrage would at last be recognized; when this didn’t happen, tensions grew. Herbert Asquith, Prime Minister from 1908, was a strong opponent of votes for women. At first, Suffragette tactics were largely confined to peaceful protests and heckling MP’s from
the Commons’ public galleries.

In 1907, the WSPU split; some members joined the Women’s Freedom League due to concern over Mrs Pankhurst’s dictatorial leadership. After 1909 the use of militant tactics caused more members including Sylvia Pankhurst to defect. Suffragettes chained themselves to railings outside Parliament. MP’s, including Asquith and Churchill, were physically attacked. Miss Wallace Dunlop began a wave of hunger strikes among imprisoned suffragettes. This provoked a newspaper backlash against the WSPU who were branded as ‘irresponsible’.

During the General Election campaign of 1910, Asquith agreed to support a ‘Conciliation Bill’ that would give the vote to female property owners. In reality, the bill was never fully supported by the Liberals who feared the women would vote Conservative. Many MP’s also believed there were more important issues such as the question of Irish Home Rule. The bill was, therefore, repeatedly delayed through ‘filibustering’; when a third attempt to pass the bill failed in 1912 this led to an upsurge in violence known as the ‘Wild Period’.

Acts of suffragette militancy now included firebomring public buildings, slashing works of art, polluting water supplies and pouring acid through pillar boxes. Cricket pavilions, racecourse grandstands and golf-clubs were a favourite target for arson attacks. The Manchester Guardian reported that:

‘At the National Gallery yesterday morning, a painting worth £45,000, was seriously damaged by a militant connected with the Women’s Social and Political Union. The woman, producing a meat chopper from her cloak, smashed the glass of the picture, and made seven cuts in the canvas. The reason for this outrage was the re-arrest of Mrs Pankhurst on Monday’.

At the Derby in 1913, Emily Davison became a martyr for the cause by throwing herself in front of the king’s race horse. Her funeral was turned into a huge suffragette demonstration but such
actions were condemned in the newspapers. Some sympathy was gained after the government passed the Temporary Discharge of Prisoners (Cat & Mouse) Act in 1913. But while the Suffragettes commanded the newspaper headlines, media hostility and public distaste for their militant actions resulted in a negative response. As Churchill claimed: ‘their cause had marched backwards’.

Questions:

1. How did the tactics of the WSPU differ from the NUWSS?

2. Why did the Liberal Government and Asquith in particular become targets for suffragette militancy after 1906?

3. Why did some members leave the WSPU after 1907?

4. Explain the reasons for the failure of the Conciliation Bill and why this led to the so-called 'Wild Period'.

5. What types of militant action did the Suffragettes become notorious for?

6. Describe the public and political reaction to the militant Suffragette campaign.

Women & World War 1

After war was declared in August 1914, the government released all suffragettes from prison. In return, the NUWSS and the WSPU ended their militant activities. Mrs Pankhurst played an active role in recruiting men into the army and encouraging women to fill the jobs left vacant on the Home Front. This decision was not popular with some suffragettes. Sylvia saw collaborating with the government as a betrayal of the movement. Christabel, however, defended the WSPU’s decision:

‘As Suffragettes we could not be pacifists at any price. Mother and I declared support of our country. We declared an armistice with the Government and suspended militancy for the duration of the war. We called upon all members to do likewise… As Mother said, 'What would be the good of a vote without a country to vote in!'
The number of women in employment rose to almost 5 million by 1918. Industries that had previously excluded women now welcomed them. Nearly 200,000 women were employed in government departments. Half a million became clerical workers in private offices. A quarter of a million worked as farm laborers in the ‘Land Army.’ Women also worked in the postal service, transport and engineering.

In 1915, a Women’s Police Service was founded; one of their main tasks was to keep discipline in the munitions factories. Almost 1 million women workers were engaged in making shells for the war effort. This was a very hazardous job; apart from the danger of explosion the main risk came from TNT poisoning which slowly damaged the women’s health. An article in Punch magazine (1916) reflected society’s changing attitudes towards women:

'It is quite impossible to keep pace with all the new incarnations of women in war-time — 'bus-conductress, ticket-collector, post-woman, bank clerk, motor-driver, farm-labourer, munition maker. Whenever he sees one of these new citizens, or hears fresh stories of their ability, Mr. Punch is proud and delighted. But he never for a moment supposed they would be anything but ready and keen when the hour of need struck.'

Many women joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) providing medical assistance behind the lines. Most, like Vera Brittain, came from comfortable, middle class backgrounds but wanted to do their bit for the war effort. After basic training, they were sent overseas. During the war, 38,000 VAD’s worked as assistant nurses, ambulance drivers and cooks. The WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps), WRAF (Women’s Royal Air Force) and WRNS (Women’s Royal Naval Service) provided invaluable support to the armed forces.

Vera Brittain

By successfully undertaking these roles, women proved their capabilities while gaining self-confidence and a degree of independence they could only have dreamed of before the war. More importantly, they won the respect and admiration of men; even Asquith, one of the main opponents of votes for women, admitted the war could not
have been won without them. However, Evelyn Sharp, a suffragist writer, resented the suggestion that women gained the vote due to the war effort:

‘Personally, I regret that any justification was given to the view that the victory of the suffrage cause in 1918 was thanks to women’s war service. This assumption is true only in so far as gratitude to women offered an excuse to the government to climb down with some dignity from a position that had become untenable before the war.’

Questions:

1. What was the reaction of female suffrage groups following the outbreak of World War One?

2. Describe the contribution of women to the war effort:
   a) on the Home Front        b) behind the front lines

3. In what ways was women’s status in society improved due to their contribution to the war effort?

4. Why did some suffragists like Evelyn Sharp object to the view that women gained the vote only thanks to the war effort?

Equality at Last?

The war put votes for women back on the political agenda. In March, 1917, MP’s voted 341 to 62 in favour of giving the vote to
women over 30 who were householders, married to householders, occupied property with an annual rent of £5 or were university graduates. MP’s were unwilling to give all women the vote as they feared they would make up the majority of the electorate. Liberals and Conservatives also feared most working class women would vote Labour. Women had their first opportunity to vote in a General Election in December 1918. Although several stood for Parliament only one, Constance Markiewicz was elected. As a member of Sinn Fein, she refused to take up her seat.

The first woman in Parliament was American-born Conservative Nancy Astor who won the Plymouth by-election in December 1919. Astor served until 1945 and campaigned vigorously on many social issues. In the 1923 election, several ex-suffragists were elected as Labour MP’s but many women who had contributed to the war effort were still excluded from voting. The anomaly remained that some women could be elected to Parliament without actually being able to vote themselves!

A bill in 1928 to give women the vote on equal terms with men faced little opposition and the Equal Franchise Act became law. All women over the age of 21 could now vote. Millicent Fawcett, one of the few founding members of the suffragists still alive, attended Parliament to see the vote take place. That night she wrote in her diary:

"It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867. I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning to the end."

In 1929 the former suffragist Margaret Bondfield became the first woman in history to gain a place in the British Cabinet as the Minister for Labour. In 1945, another former suffragist, Ellen Wilkinson, became the first woman to hold a senior Cabinet position as Minister for Education in Clement Attlee’s Labour Government.

Table showing largest number of women in Parliament for each decade since 1918.
Despite Margaret Thatcher becoming Britain’s first female Prime Minister in 1979, women have continued to make up only a small minority in Parliament.

Before 1997, women had never made up more than 10% of MP’s. In 2005, 128 women were elected, around 20% of MP’s in the House of Commons.

Questions:
1. Which women could vote under the 1918 Representation of the People Act?
2. Why were MP’s reluctant to include all women in the Act?
3. What was the significance of the Equal Franchise Act 1928?
4. Who were: a) Constance Markiewicz b) Nancy Astor c) Margaret Bondfield
5. To what extent do you think women have gained Parliamentary equality with men since 1918?
Women’s Suffrage: Historiography

Most historians agree that women would have gained the vote eventually, even without the war. They point to the growing sympathy among MP’s towards the issue of votes for women as demonstrated by the Parliamentary vote of 1911 and the significant progress made by suffragists in all areas of society before 1914.

Martin Pugh believes that the pre-war suffrage organizations paved the way:

‘the lines of the precise solution to the problem had already emerged’.

Sandra Holton, one of the leading historians on female suffrage, suggests that the main reason for women gaining the vote was the suffragists’ successful attempt to ally themselves with the trade union movement and the emerging Labour Party.

Many historians believe that the militant actions of the WSPU lost a great deal of the political and public goodwill gained by the suffragists. David Morgan is in no doubt that militancy harmed the women's cause:

‘while it kept the Suffrage pot boiling it served little real purpose, losing in Parliament more supporters than were gained, and hardening enemies as little else could have’.

Some historians argue that World War One was only one contributing factor among many others. John Stevenson states that:

‘although the First World War has usually been taken as a turning point, it is clear that the war was as much the occasion as the cause of female emancipation.’

John Ray, however, suggests that:

‘their war efforts succeeded where the suffragette campaign had failed.’

while the famous historian AJP Taylor concludes that:

‘War smoothed the way for democracy. It is one of the few things to be said in its favour.’
Extension Work

1. Read ‘Changing Britain 1850 – 1979’ p’s 46 – 47:

   Summarise the main reasons why it took so long for women to gain the vote, under the following headings:  
   a) Social attitudes
   b) Suffragist tactics
   c) Militancy
   d) World War One

2. Write a parliamentary speech by John Stuart Mill MP outlining the reasons why he believes votes for women should be included in an amendment to the 1866 Reform Bill.

3. Write a newspaper report on the Match Girls’ Strike

   or

   an interview with one of the striking workers at the Bryant and May factory.

4. Write a letter from Emily Davies to the authorities at Cambridge University outlining the reasons why she has opened Girton College

   or

   a letter from Elizabeth Garrett / Sophia Jex-Blake to the British Medical Association demanding the right to be accepted as medical graduates.

5. Write a series of diary entries by Sylvia Pankhurst outlining her concerns about the increasingly militant tactics of the suffragettes.
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VOTES FOR WOMEN