



The first women's movement

Suffragist struggles in the 19th and early 20th centuries

The 19th century saw the emergence of organised women's movements, which, by the 1920s had strengthened the bonds between women, enlarged their opportunities and forced the issue of their rights. Women on both side of the Atlantic were affected by these developments. In this presentation I choose to concentrate on the British and the American women suffragist struggle of that period.

My outline will be threefold : as a starting point I shall examine the women's question and women suffrage in England, then I will devote my second part to the study of the women suffrage in the United States. I will finally turn to the key elements of the struggle in women's movement.

The women question and the women's movement for suffrage in England

Many of the historical changes that characterised the Victorian period motivated discussions about the nature and the role of women. This was what Victoria called “The Woman Question”. This question encompasses group debates about the physiological nature, the political capacity, the moral character and the place of woman in society.

The question of the place of women in society and in politics arose most acutely in times of wars through the Revolution of 1848 to the dislocation of industrial change. And the raise for Empire towards the end of the 19th century.

Yet the woman question was also debated at the level of everyday life. Because women contested the limitations placed on their education, their property rights and their status in marriage and family.

The ideas of the suffrage movement in Britain descended directly from Enlightenment political philosophy and nineteenth-century liberal theory, notably through Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. They shared a fundamental theoretical premise: “the human attributes of men and women and the consequent social injustice involved in their unequal treatment” (page 9, Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918*).

1) The women's question

The role of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

During the Enlightenment the “Rights of Man” were under discussion in England and in France. Mary Wollstonecraft has been called the Mother of Feminism and the first feminist.

She identified with the revolutionaries of 1789. She proposed to apply enlightened ideas to women. To her, women were rational creatures who were no less capable of intellectual achievement than men. Her “Vindications of the Rights of Women” were published in 1792 and was addressed to Talleyrand, protesting against the exclusion of French women from citizen rights. It is an important work since it advocated the equality of the sexes. She ridiculed the prevailing notions about women as helpless, charming and foolish. To her, women were educated in “slavish dependence”. She criticized the sentimental and foolishness of women.

Her text is a protest against women subjugation. Education held the key of achieving self-respect. To make women able to achieve a better life, not only for themselves but also for their children and their husbands. Women provided education to their children : that is why education was so important. It took more than a century before her ideas were put into effect. Her ideas caused enormous controversy because they were so revolutionary.

Two other books were landmarks on the women's question: “An Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretences of the Other Half Men to Retain them in Political and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery” written by William Thompson in 1825, in which he denounced the supremacy of the father and husband, using a vindictive tone. He suggested a biological base to women's oppression in their role in reproduction. It was because they had to mother that women were subject to men. He advocated marriage reform. His text was the first manifesto for women rights and political equality. Thompson was a champion of the women rights.

The question of women role and women rights was discussed by the public in the 1860. The first pamphlets in favour of the enfranchisement of women began to appear in the middle of the 19th century.

John Stuart Mill published “*The Subjection of Women*” in 1869. He used the image of slavery and bondage. He argued in favour of social, economic and political emancipation of women, and assumed that each individual had interests which only he or she could represent, and on these grounds Mill justified votes for women. He presented a petition in Parliament calling for the inclusion of women suffrage in the Reform Act of 1867.

The 1860s saw the unsuccessful demand for female suffrage (the failure of the 1867 Reform Act) and the partially successful demand for a secondary higher education. By 1870, the women question was hotly debated.

The Victorian view of woman

The Victorian era is characterised as the domestic age, the age of the home. This was epitomised by Queen Victoria herself who came to represent a kind of femininity centred on the family, motherhood and respectability.

Queen Victoria devoted her life to Prince Albert. Her domestic life became the ideal family like that spread over the 19th century.

The popular Victorian image of the ideal woman and wife came to be known as the “Angel in the House”. The woman was expected to be devoted to her husband and submitted to him. The Angel had the following characteristics: passive, powerless, meek, charming, graceful with her dresses, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious and above all, pure.

The development of the “woman question” in the early years of Victoria's reign turned out to be beneficial chiefly for middle-class women. Debates about relations between sexes flourished and impinged on national political issues. In the 1850s the focus shifted onto questions concerning middle-class women's work.

The “Separate Sphere” ideology

This ideology dictated that the only proper place for a respectable woman was in the home, providing care comfort to her husband and children. This ideology was developed to explain why this separation was necessary, by defining the inherent characteristics of women.

These traits supposedly made women incapable of functioning in the public sphere. Women were classified as physically weaker, yet morally superior to men. This concept was reinforced by religion. It was believed that women superiority best suited them in the domestic sphere. Women were also expected to teach the next generation, the necessary moral virtues to ensure the survival of society. Fertility was God mission: Queen Victoria had 10 children.

2) Women's rights and women suffrage

Women's rights

In the eyes of the law, a married woman had no property, no vote, no rights to her children. It was a long struggle for them to acquire their rights as individuals. The state of coverture was part of the English common law system throughout most of the 19th century. It was a legal doctrine that stated that upon marriage, a woman's legal rights were subsumed by those of her

husband: he had all the rights. Whereas single and widowed women could hold money or run business and have property. Married women had no equivalent rights, they were excluded from their claim. Emmeline Pankhurst had helped found the Women's Franchise League, a body opposed to the coverture clause.

Chartism, unions and women

Chartism was a popular radical movement campaigning for universal male suffrage which was highly hypocritical. Meanwhile it attracted large numbers of women. Many wives took an active role in furthering the Chartist movement and helped their husbands. Tens of thousands of working women were active in this movement. "There were about 150 female Chartist associations, one for every 9 male associations" (page 177 *The Nineteenth century*, Colin Matthew). The movement towards granting women franchise really started in 1867, when the National Society for Women Suffrage was created. It favoured petitions and obtained one clear victory in 1869 with the Municipal Franchise Act: unmarried and widowed women ratepayers could vote in borough elections. This key act enabled women to take part in local government. Several women like Mary Corbett, Emmeline Pankhurst and Charlotte Despard took advantage of this opportunity. They served as poor law guardians.

In 1880 about 1 million women in England and Wales had a local franchise. In 1889, Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Franchise League. She campaigned in favour of the franchise and gained a victory when in 1894 the local government Act was passed. With this Act, married women were allowed the equal right to both vote and seat on municipal councils.

Mrs Millicent Fawcett formed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society in 1897, the largest suffrage organisation in the United Kingdom. This was a federation of existing women's suffrage groups. It was the successor of the National Society for Women's suffrage. These suffragists were in favour of the women's suffrage. However there were some women frustrated of the stalemate, and became more militant.

The Suffragettes and Civil disobedience

Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. It concentrated its activities on promoting support for votes for women within socialist and trade union branches in the Manchester area. They were disillusioned by the slow progress being made and began a violent approach, which was called the arson campaign: suffragettes in all parts of Great Britain began destroying property.

From 1909 onwards, the violence of their attacks grew progressively until serious attacks on property: they torched churches and cricket pavilions, set letter-boxes ablaze, slashed works of art and detonated bombs. In 1912, Emmeline Pankhurst declared and urged her followers: "Those of you who can break windows, break them. Those of you who can still further attack property so as to make the government realise that property is as greatly endangered by Women Suffrage as it was by the Chartists of old, do so. And my last words to the government: I incite this meeting to rebellion" (page 217, Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women, A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914*).

"The most conservative estimate suggests that property worth well over £500,000 was destroyed within 18 months" (page 230 Barry Cunliffe, *The Penguin Illustrated History of Britain and Ireland*).

One event has dominated the popular image of the suffrage movement in its history : on a sunny June day in 1913, Emily Wilding Davidson, prompted by a desire to gain publicity for women's suffrage went to the Derby, rushed out on to the racecourse, grabbed the reins of the King's horse and tried to stop the race. She was unsuccessful, died of head injuries a few days later and was mourned as the first suffragette martyr.

These different forms of violence was a response to the frustration at the slow rate of progress and the violent response of the police and prison officials. This was noticeable after the hunger strikes of imprisoned suffragettes led to force feeding and the passing of the Cat and Mouse Act. This allowed the release of prisoners weakened by hunger, but then allowed them to be re-arrested when they regained their strength. These events brought the Suffragettes to public attention, but alienated many politicians. This arson campaign ceased only with the outbreak of World War I.

The march to the 1928 Equal Franchise Act

On 19 June 1917 the House of Commons accepted the female-suffrage clause in the Representation of the People Bill by 385 votes to 55. In the House of Lords it was passed by a vote of 134 to 71. With the successful passage of the Representation of the People Act all women on the local government register, or who were wives of men on the local government register and were over the age of thirty were enfranchised. In the general election of 1918, 8.5 million women joined 12.9 million men in voting. Nonetheless female suffrage remained restricted to women over the age of 30 years who were local government electors.

The contribution made to the war effort by millions of women may have done more to

convince MPs to grant women the vote than any protests.

The 1918 general election was also the first in which women could stand as MPs. While the suffragettes ceased to exist after 1918 suffragists continued to fight for universal female suffrage. It was not until the Equal Franchise Act that women won the vote on the same terms as men.

From 1880 women in the Isle of Man even voted in elections for the island's legislature, the House of Keys.

In 1928 the Conservative Party with the support of both opposition parties equalised the franchise laws. With this legislation women in Britain were at last given equal political rights with men.

Woman suffrage in the United States

The enfranchisement of American women did not come easily. The early pioneers for women's rights were subjected to humiliation and occasional violence. Many women devoted their lives to the cause.

1) A step by step movement

Main figures

The origin of the woman's rights movement is commonly dated from 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, when the anti-slavery movement split over the question of women's right to participate. Women decided then that they needed to organize on behalf of their own emancipation too. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, from the radical wing of the suffragists and Lucretia Mott, a Philadelphia Quaker called a convention and drew up the first public protest in America against women's political, economic and social inferiority. This protest modeled after the Declaration of Independence, was called the "Declaration of Sentiments" which proclaimed that "all men and women are created equal". The Seneca Falls gathering represented an important first step in the evolving campaign for women.

Susan B. Anthony, a Quaker joined the crusade in the 1850s and devoted her life to the women's crusade. She constantly travelled about the country, speaking, organising, pleading. In 1869, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association to promote a women's suffrage amendment to the Constitution. Later the same year, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and other leaders formed the American Suffrage

Association, which focused on the vote for women as the first and most basic reform.

With the rapid population growth in the late nineteenth century, the number of employed women steadily increased, as did the percentage of women in the labour force.

State by state during the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century

By 1890 the cause of women's rights had come a long way since 1848. The state of Mississippi was the first to grant married women control over their property, in 1839; by the 1860s eleven more states had such laws. In 1861 Kansas adopted school suffrage. Michigan and Minnesota adopted a similar reform in 1875 and thirteen other states and territories had followed suit by 1890. Wider forms of suffrage had by then been introduced.

Over the years the National American Woman Suffrage Association (union of the two previous rival groups) achieved some local and partial victories as a few states granted women suffrage in school board or municipal elections.

In 1869 the territory of Wyoming decreed full political equality to women and after 1890 retained women's suffrage when it entered the Union as a state. Three other western states soon followed: Colorado in 1893, Utah and Idaho in 1896 enfranchised their women. Washington, California, Kansas, Oregon and Arizona followed the lead of the other western states by enfranchising women in the years from 1910 to 1912.

The first state east of the Mississippi to enfranchise women was Illinois in 1913, with a partial right to vote. Not until New York acted and approved a full-suffrage constitutional amendment in 1917, did a state east of the Mississippi River adopt universal suffrage. Victory throughout the nation was assured. The 36th state Tennessee ratified the national amendment in August 1920. This progressive movement in the western states, sparsely populated was based on the conviction that women's supposedly gentler and more nurturing nature would civilize the men who had populated the frontier.

2) Social problems and the “Do everything” movement

Changes in mentalities “Women different from men”

The rise of the middle class changed women's lives. For most of the 19th century, the ideal of “separate spheres” had dominated relations between the sexes: the male sphere was one of work, politics and public events; the female sphere was one of domesticity, moral education and child rearing. Men and women were not supposed to intrude into each other's spheres.

This doctrine frustrated increasingly educated women who wanted to work and be outside the

home. After the Civil War women challenged the separate-sphere ideal in a variety of ways.

Protests and hunger strikes

Militant organisation centred on exhibitions of popular support. When these failed, militant campaigning focused on threats to public order. Under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt who became president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), grassroots campaigns intensified. Alice Paul, a Quaker social worker who chaired the Congressional Committee of the NAWSA, instructed female activists to be more aggressive. They targeted and punished politicians who failed to endorse suffrage, chained themselves to public buildings, provoke police and undertake hunger strikes. With her supporters, she focused attention on the White House, picketing President Wilson's home 24 hours a day, daring the police to arrest them. They were arrested and went on hunger strikes in prison.

The 19th Amendment to the Constitution

The suffragists achieved their goal of universal suffrage in 1920, aided by the enthusiasm for democracy generated by America's participation in World War I. President Wilson finally endorsed the "Susan B. Anthony" Amendment in speeches to the House and Senate in 1918. In a speech he said "we have partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not a partnership of right?" (page 788, George Brown Tindall, David Emory Shi, *America, a Narrative history*). The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920. It was the climatic achievement of the Progressive Era.

Many supporters of the 19th Amendment expected it to transform American politics: women voters would reverse the decline in voter participation, cleanse politics of corruption.

Key elements of the struggle in women's movement

1) Education for women

From the 1850s girls' literacy rates began to improve

The needs of corporate America for increasingly educated workers led to changes in American education. School enrollments went up, the number of high schools grew rapidly. Middle-class daughter benefited from this explosion of education. The number of female high school

graduates rose steeply between 1870 and 1900 from 9,000 to 57,000 (*Liberty, Equality, Power*). Some of the nation's most prestigious women's colleges were founded in the 1870s and 1880s: Wellesley, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe and Barnard. The number of female colleges graduates increased from 1,378 to 5,237 (*Liberty, Equality, Power*). During the 1920s the number of female college students increased by 50%.

In Britain, Maria Grey created the first National Union for improving the education of all women classes. This union was known as the Women's Education Union. It was a pressure group for women rights to professional recognition. It founded Maria Grey Training College for female teachers (1878).

The Education Acts of 1870 and 1872 gave women the right both to vote and to stand as candidates in school board elections. The 1894 Local Government Act allowed married women the right to vote and sit on municipal councils.

Girton first College for girls in Cambridge and other followed

Cambridge took the lead in opening its school examinations to girls in 1863. University colleges for women had been founded at Cambridge and Oxford. The first of them Girton College, Cambridge, Emily Davies' foundation in 1869 prepared women for degrees.

The London School of Medicine for Women was founded in 1874, chiefly through the determination of Sophia Jex-Blake who had been frustrated at her attempts to gain a medical education. London University was the first to award women degrees on the same terms as men in 1878.

2) Social Justice

The Settlement House movement

Established by middle-class reformers, settlement houses were intended to help the largely immigrant urban poor cope with the harsh conditions of city life. Much of the inspiration for settlement houses came from young, college-educated, Protestant women from comfortable backgrounds. Highly educated, talented, sensitive to social injustice, they sought to assert their independence in socially useful ways.

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr established the nation's first settlement house, "Hull House", in Chicago in 1889. It was designed for poor, mainly foreign-born working-class families. They set up a nursery for the children of working mothers, a penny savings bank, an

employment bureau, a baby clinic, a neighbourhood playground and social clubs. They wanted to minister cultural as well as economic needs.

The settlement house movement had spawned a corps of social workers and genteel reformers animated by religious ideals and devoted to the uplift of slum inhabitants. Thousands of women across the country were inspired to build their own settlement houses on the Hull House model. By 1910, 400 settlement houses would open in cities. Jane Addams became one of the most famous women in the States. She encouraged immigrants, in the respect of their origins, to become Americans, which was a liberal attitude. She and other settlement workers played a critical role in fashioning the progressive agenda and elaborated a progressive legislation.

Progressivism

The settlement house movement manifested an important aspect of progressivism: in massive numbers they tried to fight social ills. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) founded in 1874 was the largest women's group at the end of the 19th century with 300,000 members. Its motto was "do everything" to emphasize that all social problems were interconnected. Members tried to close saloons, improve prison conditions, shelter prostitutes and abused women and children, support female labor unions and women's suffrage. The WCTU also lobbied for the eight-hour workday, the regulation of child labour, better nutrition, the federal inspection of food processors and drug manufacturers, uniform marriage and divorce laws across the states. Religion was a crucial source of energy for progressive reformers. The cause of liquor prohibition was their foremost concern. In 1913 the league endorsed an amendment to the Constitution prohibiting the sale of all alcoholic beverages.

A nation of Clubwomen

Hundreds of thousands of women belonged to local women's clubs. Conceived as self-help organizations in which women would be encouraged to sharpen their minds, refine their domestic skills, and strengthen their moral faculties, these clubs began taking on tasks of social reform. Clubwomen improved schools, libraries, playgrounds, education for girls, on matters of sexuality and alcohol. They secured fire and sanitation codes for tenement houses. In so doing, they made traditional female concerns questions of public policy.

These clubwomen rose in white and black communities.

3) History favoured women: World War I

A new labour force

For women American intervention in World War I had positive effects. Women supported the war effort in traditional ways at the beginning. As the scope of the war widened, both government and industry mobilized women workers for service on farms, loading docks, railway crews, armaments industry, machine shops, steel and lumber mills, chemical plants. The number of female clerical workers doubled between 1910 and 1920, with many of these women finding work in the government war bureaucracies. Altogether, a million women toiled in war-related industries (page 831, *Liberty, Equality, Power, A History of the American People*).

Working class wives

In England, “Middle-class feminists had dominated women's suffrage organisations in the late nineteenth century, working-class women, and especially those organised within the labour movement, were becoming an increasingly significant presence among rank-and-file suffragists by the early years of the 20th century” (page 2, Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918*,).

Work gave women a new sense of social independence. Their work were distant from their homes. They received wages, which, although low, heightened their sense of economic freedom. The participation rates of married women aged 18-24 increased between 1911 and 1921 (page 150, Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950 sexual divisions & social change*). What emerged from the wartime experience was the conviction that it was possible for women to combine work, marriage and motherhood without their home responsibilities being seriously undermined.

Women doing men's work

Approximately 40,000 northern women found work as streetcar conductors, railroad workers, metalworkers, munition makers and in other jobs customarily reserved for men (page 831 *Liberty, Equality, Power, A History of the American People*).

4) The culture of modernism during the 1920s

The word modern began appearing everywhere: modern times, modern women, modern marriage, the modern home. It connoted certain beliefs and among them, that sex should be a source of pleasure for women as well as men, that women should be equal to men and enjoy

the same rights. Women expressed their newfound sense of freedom in a variety of ways: they took up physical exercise, intellectual activities, forming book clubs, volunteer associations.

The New Sexuality

The leaders of the revolt against separate spheres ideology included middle-class women, who after achieving first-rate educations at elite women's colleges. The revolt drew as well on young, single working-class women who were entering the workforce in large numbers and mixing at workplaces with men their own age. The associations between young men and women that sprang up at work carried over into their leisure: young people of both sexes went to dance halls and adopted freedom forms of dancing such as fox trot, tango and bunny-hug. They went to movies and to amusement parks and they engaged in premarital sex, sooner than their parents had. "It is estimated that the proportion of women having sex before marriage rose from 10% to 25% in the generation that was coming of age between 1910 and 1920. Sex came to be discussed with surprising frankness during the 1920s. Books and magazines included discussions for libido, Oedipus complexes...derived from the spreading of Dr Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.

The rise of Feminism

This movement toward sexual freedom was one expression of women's dissatisfaction with the restrictions that had been imposed on them by earlier generations. By the second decade of the 20th century, eloquent spokeswomen had emerged to make the case for full freedom and equality. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, Alice Paul were among them. They called for the release of women from domestic chores, birth control, free sexual relations without having to worry about unwanted motherhood. Marriage was denounced as a kind of prostitution. These women were among the first to use the term "feminism" to describe their desire for complete equality with men. Some of them came together in Greenwich Village, a community of radical artists and writers in lower Manhattan. Crystal Eastman, a leader of feminist Greenwich Village group called Heterodoxy, defined the feminist challenge as "how to arrange the world so that women can be human beings, with a chance to exercise their infinitely varied gifts in infinitely varied ways, instead of being destined by the accident of their sex to one field of activity".

The “New Woman”

The changing world of consumerism helped women to leave homes: women had to go outside their suburban houses to shop in downtown department stores! Recent household inventions and changes in living patterns gave them more time for outside activities. The New Woman became a dominant figure of American popular culture in the 1890s. She replaced the earlier middle-class ideal of voluptuous, plump, round-faced matron. The New Woman was tall, slender, and athletic. She rejected the fashions of her mother's generation. Instead she adopted a more practical style of clothing fashioned after men's clothing. Fashion reflected the rebellion against prudishness and inhibitions. In 1919 women's skirts were above the ground, by 1927 they were at the knee. The “flapper” appeared with her bobbed hair, cigarettes, red lipstick and sensuous dancing. The image of new woman became an expression of American individualism. The boundaries between the separate spheres began to blur.

Conclusion

To conclude, women fought for their rights and universal female suffrage during almost 60 years, 3 generations. The women's suffrage campaign was a success story, with the principle of suffrage conceded in 1918 and equal franchise rights which followed in 1928.

But around the world the struggle still continues for many women to achieve full equality with men.

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