

# Why did women achieve the vote?



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The ideology attributed to women has shifted radically over the last 150 years, consequently increasing the demands and expectations that women have on and of themselves. One of the most well documented battles of modern women's history is that of the campaign for women's suffrage in Britain. With this in mind, the intention of this essay is to investigate the issues encompassing the eventual enfranchisement of British women in 1918 to determine why suffrage was granted. A conclusion will be drawn by juxtaposing the ideology of women before and after World War One and analysing the effectiveness of the suffrage campaigns and the role that women played in the Great War.

In order to determine the significance of women's suffrage organisations and to understand the importance of their campaigns we must begin by examining the reasons for their formation.

The roots of women's suffrage are steeped in the bloodied waters of female oppression, with evidence of misogyny found in the ancient texts from the Old Testament to Homer's Iliad among others (Wojtczak, H. 2009), it is clear that women's history is dominated by subjugation to men. This cultural constant has been challenged by pioneering female warriors, scientists, and writers who have proved that women possess intelligence and integrity in equal capacity as men; women such as Boadicea, Marie Curie, and Mary Wollstonecraft among countless others have inspired and altered the ideology of the 'fairer sex'.

The popular opinions surrounding gender roles from the mid-nineteenth century until WWI were imbued with the dogma of a patriarchal society

whose goal was to control the population by means of oppression – of the poor, the weak and the women. The gender ideology of this period has been named ‘separate spheres’ – a term which implies that men and women live in antithetic worlds; men occupied the public sphere, while women inhabited the domestic. This separation of the sexes led to gender norms and stereotypes that both men and women have fought to overcome.

By extension of this ideology, from 1834 qualified women could vote in local elections on domestic policy as women were seen as the nurturing sex, they had influence over schools, poor relief and hospitals which were seen as extensions of the home and therefore within the limits of female competency. Women were seen as instinctively submissive; their fate was marriage and their only function was to bear children, consequently women were domestic prisoners.

This period saw the traditional idea of natural male supremacy challenged by that of gender equality. Consequently, the ‘separate spheres’ ideology lost power to ‘The Representation of the People Act’ in 1918 which gave the vote to women over thirty, and was eventually shattered ten years later when men and women were granted equal rights to suffrage.

As education became more accessible in the late 19th century, the unfolding capabilities of women produced uncertainty around their traditional roles in the home and in wider society, ordinary women began to realise that they did not have to ‘accept their lot’, and that through empowerment of the female population they could control the direction of their lives.

In 1832 the first petition on women's suffrage was presented to Parliament and was, according to *The Times*, '...more jocular than serious in its tone' (Wojtczak, H. 2009). From the reaction of the media it is clear that women's suffrage was seen as a joke – something that only weak-willed women would treat with importance, and something that would go away if ignored.

In addition to this, anti-women's suffrage groups and supporters were mostly female (Bush, J. 2012); this gave suffragists the challenge to prove that they wanted and deserved the right to vote. This atmosphere of political, social, and economic inequality became the amniotic sac in which women's suffrage societies throughout Britain developed. Women for whom the road to liberation was in sight began to discuss the political issues surrounding their lives and set up groups to begin this awareness to others.

The women's suffrage movement consisted of two seemingly contrasting groups, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the Women's Social and Political Union. The tactics employed by these groups were radically different in purpose and approach. While the NUWSS sought to educate the population through lawful activities, the WSPU took a militant approach, preferring to provoke the government and anyone who opposed them through violence and criminal damage.

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was founded in 1897 by Millicent Fawcett through an alliance of suffrage organisations throughout Britain. The NUWSS (suffragists) were an inherently peaceful organisation whose primary goal was to educate, they sought to achieve this by producing, publishing and distributing free literature and accessible

newspapers such as 'The Common Cause' which addressed the concerns of working class women of the time. Although the NUWSS was an organisation comprised of the least politically powerful people, their work was effective in the moulding of public opinion; this is evident in the growth of the organisation from fifteen branches in 1897 to five hundred in 1914.

This moderate suffragist organisation was crucial in constructing a platform for the suffragettes to yell from (Parliament. n. d.). In dramatic contrast to the peaceful actions of the NUWSS, the WSPU used militancy to publicise their cause and to recruit like-minded women to their group. Led by Emmeline Pankhurst from 1903-1914, the Women's Social and Political Union were determined to gain suffrage for women on an equal basis to men.

Although the NUWSS built the foundations of the suffrage movement, the WSPU were frustrated by the stilted pace of their campaign. In response to this, they staged dramatic demonstrations to gain attention to their cause. The WSPU also challenged gender norms by attending meetings and protests dressed in clothing that emphasised their femininity while they performed 'unfeminine' actions such as shouting, smashing windows, setting fires. This political theatre ensured the WSPU the front page of the daily newspapers and it soon became clear that their shocking tactics were far more powerful in raising public awareness than those of the peaceful but purposeful NUWSS.

However, as a consequence of their criminal actions, members of the WSPU were frequently arrested and imprisoned on failure to pay fines. Once within the confines of a cell the women would commit to hunger strikes which led

them to be force fed. When the public grew aware of this, there was an outcry of sympathy and outrage at the government's actions.

Accordingly, the government came up with an alternative which wiped their hands of suffragette blood; they passed the 'Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act' (dubbed 'The Cat and Mouse Act') in 1913 which said that once the women who refused to eat became weak they were to be sent home under watch until they were well again. This meant that any deaths that occurred as a result of hunger strikes and force feeding would no longer be on the government's conscience as they would happen outside of their control.

From 1905, when the WSPU formed, until 1914 at the beginning of the First World War approximately one-thousand women were imprisoned as a result of militant action against the government; the majority of these female prisoners were members of the WSPU (Purvis, J. 1995).

In her book 'My Own Story', Emmeline Pankhurst stated: 'It was rapidly becoming clear to my mind that men regarded women as a servant class in the community, and that women were going to remain in the servant class until they lifted themselves out of it.' (Pankhurst, E. 1914). This statement reflects the atmosphere within the WSPU at the start of the first world war – they felt they had to prove that women were capable of being committed to the responsibilities usually entrusted to men.

At the outbreak of World War One, Emmeline Pankhurst called an end to militancy (Purvis, J. 1995) and the WSPU threw their energy behind the government by supporting the war effort. In contrast to this, the NUWSS

continued campaigning throughout the war, choosing to use the war as a means of empowerment.

From the beginning of World War One it was clear that the production of the paraphernalia of war on the home front would be of equal importance to fighting on the front line; Britain needed workers and women needed to prove themselves capable of filling typically male roles within the home and the workforce. To begin with, there was opposition against the formation of a female workforce – one argument against this was from the trade unions who feared that men would be replaced by women as a cheaper alternative for employers.

However, this was not the case as at the end of the war the government passed the ‘Restoration of Pre-War Practices Bill (1919)’ which took employment from many working-class women. The aim of this bill was to ‘... ensure the right of restoration of certain customs and practices to pre-war conditions.’

In ‘Votes for Women 1860-1928’, Paula Bartley states that ‘... women may well not have been granted the vote if the suffragists and suffragettes had not campaigned so effectively before the war.’ As an historian and author of many books on the subject of women’s history, Bartley is qualified to make such a claim. She also states that rather than propelling the emancipation of women to the forefront of discussion, the war delayed it by four years; further hindering the chance that women would be enfranchised (Bartley, P. 1998).

One argument in favour of the NUWSS as being influential in gaining women's suffrage is that without them the WSPU may never have formed (Hunnam, J. N. D.). Although the WSPU were criticised for their militant tactics, their work is recognised as an integral element in achieving women's suffrage as the membership of NUWSS increased to 55, 000 by 1914. Therefore, militancy has to take credit for publicising in movement. In opposition to this is the view that the unlawful tactics employed by the WSPU alienated the support of ordinary women who wanted to be emancipated but also valued their reputations – this is supported by the loss of WSPU members during peaks in violent activity.

In conclusion, I believe that an analogy for the women's suffrage movement is that of a fire. The NUWSS acted as kindling to establish a base on which the movement could rest, the WSPU represented fuel poured over the unyielding wood – a means through which the fervent passion of a nation could flow – and World War One was the spark necessary for the fire to become tangible. The commitment of women to the war effort was the heat that enabled the suffrage movement to rise to the top of the government's priorities. Therefore, without each element of the fire, women would not have achieved the right to vote in 1918.

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