

Suffragettes: how british women won their right to vote

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



The steady pressure by the moderate suffragists was the most important reason for the achievement of votes for women by 1918. How accurate is this view? The 19th and 20th century were times of progressive change for the British society. With the beginning of industrialisation and the increasing literacy of the common folk it was clear that demands for more democracy would be made. For men changed would happen faster since naturally men were the superior gender and were regarded as a reliable working and fighting force. The women who were supporting them and who despite their knowledge and desire to contribute to society had been ignored. They had no political power in the 1850s but that was about to change. More and more women were getting agitated by their stuck up social lives and abusive husbands. And with the modernisation it was no longer men who controlled the whole working force of Britain. Females formed Women's movements, which represented the views of the progressive Victorian woman to the public and government. Status of women was changing and was also a huge factor for their enfranchising. Exactly that changing status made them so precious in the Great War, where many were employed in medical care and shell-making, aiding the war effort, which strengthened the views that women were capable and hard-working. This view was also supported by foreign suffrage campaigners, coming from countries such as New Zealand which had already given women's movement and destroyed many of the prejudices towards women. All of these factors helped women get the vote in 1918 but some historians debate which one of these is most important. For some, the women's movement, especially the suffragists, greatly influenced politicians and tipped the scale in favour of enfranchisement. Others believe

the changing status of women, war or foreign support were a greater factor. Suffragists were indeed a memorable force in Women's society. Their numbers were great and their methods of protest were always peaceful and reasonable, disproving the initial beliefs of men that females are irrational and too emotional. Created by Millicent Fawcett, the organisation had more than 100 000 members across Britain and had a wide influence. Since the suffragists were mainly middle and upper class women who were well educated and well mannered their numerous letters to the government were build up slowly to turn the initial gentle nudge into a strong push as their arguments were true and unbeatable. Their main points of argument were the constant changes in the world and in women's status. They established the idea that sooner or later politicians wouldn't have a choice but to give women the vote. Another fact pointed out, was the growing part of women in the workforce. The new office workers were mainly women and the suffragists made the government understand that. They achieved some concessions regarding working women. The Government granted bits of power to women but not all of the achievements were due to suffragists work. Their Processions did gain media attention and they changed the view of the women from fragile and powerless creatures to a logical and capable being and according to Sir Robert Ensor " effect was beyond question" , meaning now the general public accepted the movement, respected them and the suffragist managed to make their contribution to the enfranchising of women. Nut most of the time, the peaceful negotiations didn't receive media attention and were easily ignored. Plus after the failing of an Act, the movement broke its ties with the Liberals and lost their support. It could be

said that because of their subtle character and not so vigorous means, the suffragists weren't that big of a factor to the freedom of vote. Other influences were stronger than the movement, but the suffragists did have their part in the play. The ones who according to the suffragists "destroyed" the image they had worked so hard to create were the suffragettes. Created by the more impatient part of the Women's movement their motto "Deeds not words" encouraged the use of actions in protesting instead of peaceful methods. The movement was successful in attracting the media attention. Most of the time the suffragettes were known for immature actions such as spiting or policemen, stone throwing or ripping paintings at the National gallery, which of course in now way improved the situation of women and historian H. L Peacock claims "In general their tactics did little to further their cause" and after their violent period had started they had little public support left, meaning the organisation was quite notorious and was bound to divide and disappear. The force feeding after many of the suffragettes were imprisoned gained compassion from the public and put the government in an uncomfortable position. But for every step the suffragettes made forward two were made backward, since they were acting exactly as the stern Victorian men described a woman-"Irrational and emotional". Thus only annoying the government and did little to benefit the cause of enfranchisement. More importantly all of those protesting women couldn't be able to do so if not for the progressing status of women during the 19th and 20th century. Slowly but surely women were breaking the stereotype "angelic", "obedient" creatures, who can't look after themselves. In the early 1850's, 1860s women still had no right over their possessions, children and

money after marriage and if they did not marry they were seen as a failure. Divorce was obtainable only by an act of parliament but in 1895 many things changed and women could obtain separation orders provided their husband had been cruel to them, and could also become guardians of their children. They were also given power at local elections and could vote at them. It was quite silly that the vote was given at local level and prosecuted at national, many thought so and it seemed like the distance to the equal voting system was shortening, women now knew what they wanted. After the 1870 Education act girls had the same basic education as boys. Education meant protestors were now literate, could read, write and think properly of their political situation and would therefore demand change. The government was under pressure. It was obvious that "women provided by their work that they deserved the vote equally with men" as John Ray said. It meant women were capable and just as intelligent as men and to back them up many Trade Unions allowed female workers to join and represented their rights as equal to men. Society was now more open towards the idea of equal enfranchisement and that meant change was imminent and was going to happen but when exactly it was up to the government. Opinions of politicians often withered when a representative from the Women's movement abroad came to support the cause. Even David Lloyd George, who was an anti-suffrage, changes his mind after attending a speech by a representative from New Zealand. Britain was falling behind and politicians did not like that. It was supposed to be the motherland leading the colonies and not "the children leading the parent". Canada, New Zealand and some states in the USA had already given women the vote and that couldn't be ignored.

Women's movements in Britain used that to make their point stronger. Also since there were speakers from different countries at meetings about the right of women, these received greater attention. Now everyone was more aware that countries could only flourish after changes regarding vote had occurred and would not end up in an apocalyptic manner as some anti-suffrage believed. As American suffragette Rheta Dorr said " In half a dozen countries women are already completely enfranchised. In England the opposition is seeking terms to surrender" meaning British government was coming to realise their falling behind and national pride was overcoming prejudices, which contributed to the cause of women's suffrage. The next factor in the path of women's suffrage has been greatly debated throughout the years. Many believe it was of great help to the cause, since it highlighted the strategic and economic value of women. It is a fact that war did matter when it comes to women getting the vote. There were little men left to push the economy and out of necessity the government chose to employ women and realised they were doing a job just as that of men. Plus since Florence Nightingale got involved in the medical aspect of war, it had been greatly improved. Nursing was now a proper profession and females became respected personnel. As ASP Taylor said " War smoothed the way for democracy-meaning women's war effort had ensured their enfranchisement. It was not possible for the government done through the war. The Women's movement had helped the government greatly when it came to campaigning and there was a feeling that change was at the horizon, as a popular suffrage poster hinted. In 1918 the Bill was finally passed but not all women got the vote. Middle class females aged 30 or above could vote, which

means democracy was still some way down the road. But it is true war helped pave the way to it. Women suffrage was achieved with the blood and sweat of many. British females had to prove their value in several different ways in order for the public to even see them. It seems that the suffragists didn't greatly succeed in making themselves obvious. Their quiet protest was always in the shadows of the " active" suffragettes. They did achieve a few perks for their fellow citizens but weren't that important to the enfranchisement. The war wasn't as important too, since there were signs women would get the vote anyway but it did ensure their success. The changing status of women in society and the support from abroad made the biggest impact on the cause, since these were the two most obvious reasons women could use against the unstable beliefs of men. It was not long until the government gave in after the end of the war. This debate had been won by British females and proved a change for the best.