

Changing attitudes to women and their right to vote

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



During the period of 1900-1914, there were various reasons as to why women failed to gain the vote. Traditionally, women were seen as inferior and emotionally weak compared to men in addition to a low place in society. This also reflected their legal rights which were also very limited. For example when a woman married, any land that she owned would go directly to her husband. Furthermore if a woman then had children she no legal rights over them and if the couple then got divorced she lost all her possessions as well as the children.

Thackeray the novelist described the ideal middle-class wife as: 'an exquisite slave, humble, flattering, tea-making, piano-forte-playing being, who laughs at out jokes, coaxes us... and fondly lies to use throughout life. ' This was the common view at the time on women and shared by many Victorian men.

During and towards the end of the nineteenth century, many improvements were made to the status of the working woman. This was due to the fact that the British economy was at a high point and therefore more opportunities arose for women in jobs such as teaching and clerical work.

Near the end of the nineteenth century education became a high priority, especially for women. Unlike boys, young women were taught at home, often by governesses. A key figure who campaigned for women's rights in education was Emily Davies who led campaigns to reform the education of girls. However in 1876 an act was passed allowing women to further their education by taking medical degrees. Women also earned better legal rights such as fairer divorce laws, control and ownership of their property and wealth and some custody of the children.

In general by the end of the nineteenth century women had gain better education rights and fairer divorce law but they were still classed as both emotionally weak and inferior to men. Therefore this was one of the reasons why women failed to gain the right to vote between 1900 and 1914.

However there were three other main factors that prevented women getting the vote. These were the failure of women's movements, social reasons and political reasons. The first of these factors being, the failure of women's movements to gain the vote.

For instance, in 1897 a group called the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed and consisted of mainly middle-class women. These women had gained success in the early stage with many liberal MP's backing them. One in particular was John Stuart Mill. The NUWSS was led by Millicent Fawcett, a firm believer in rational and peaceful methods. The NUWSS were extremely good at bringing the women's suffrage cause into the public eye. They used tactics such as petitions and friendly demonstrations to gain support and respect to illustrate the seriousness and dedication to the women's suffrage cause.

They even met MP's and argued their case but this was to little success. The problem was that no political party was prepared to put the women's suffrage cause as one of their policies. The issue was raised fifteen times in parliament but faces strong opposition. This opposition included Queen Victoria who thought that women who wanted the vote were 'the most hateful, heartless and disgusting of human beings. ' Even a prominent woman such as Florence Nightingale believed that there were more

important issues to argue. Although their slow but sure approach seemed unsuccessful it would eventually have achieved the right for women to vote.

However some of the middle-class ladies in the NUWSS became frustrated with the idea of a diplomatic and slow approach. As a result in 1903 a more active group called the Suffragettes was formed, its leaders being Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters. The Suffragettes' extremist tactics of arson, chaining themselves to buildings, slashing paintings and window smashing was self-defeating as they lost sympathy and support for the suffrage cause. They also provided the government with an excuse not to enfranchise them and were treated as lunatics, not political prisoners when they were jailed.

Some women were force fed as they refused to eat. The Suffragettes tactics did not impress the Liberals, and consequently, they lost sympathetic MPs in the House of Lords. The unwomanly actions like heckling and pestering politicians, hurling missiles at the police and rowdy demonstrations outside halls from which they were banned, had alienated the more cautious sympathisers. Furthermore the two groups, the suffragists and the suffragettes were both working towards the same goal but had very different tactics. The NUWSS grew increasingly ashamed of the Suffragettes who gave women who campaigned for the vote a very bad reputation.

Therefore the two groups were not united. This meant that the campaign could have appeared as disorganised and preventing women getting the vote as a result of this. Another reason women failed to gain the vote between 1900 and 1914 was the attitude of male politicians. In general

women were considered the weaker sex who were incapable of voting as they were too emotional and politics was considered not to be a 'woman's thing.' Most politicians certainly did not want women to get the vote as they felt the favour certain parties such as the Conservatives because many of their policies such as housing which were relevant to women.

In 1906 the Liberal party was victorious in the general election and Henry Campbell- Bannerman, the Prime Minister agreed to see a group of respectable middle-class women campaigning for the vote. He later stated that he personally was in favour of the vote however his cabinet was not, this resulting a great disappointment to the Suffrage cause. On October 1906 the NUWSS announced that they would put up their own independent male candidates to run against the Liberal opponents and subsequently in 1907 the Suffragettes began strongly opposing to all Liberal MP's at by-elections.

Henry Campbell- Bannerman, the Prime Minister died in 1908 and was replaced by Herbert Asquith, a strong opponent of women suffrage. However at a later stage the Liberal government introduced a bill to give women the vote but as the WSPU increased its campaign of violence some MP's changed their minds and on 28th of March 1912 the bill was defeated. I believe this was one of the major set backs that prevented women achieving the right to vote. After being so patient, women could have finally achieved the vote if it wasn't for the violent tactics of the suffragettes.

Although the Labour party then grew supportive of the women suffrage campaign women had missed one of the greatest chances they had as to

getting the vote. In conclusion I think that it was a combination of factors that prevented women from getting the vote between 1900 and 1914, including the attitudes of politicians and men towards women getting the vote, the inferior role of women in society, the violent tactics of the suffragettes and the prospect of the looming war with Germany.

However I think the most important of these reasons which prevented women achieving the vote between 1900 and 1914 was the violent tactics of the suffragettes in campaigning for the vote. This is evident when the bill was defeated in 1912 by the Liberal party. Without the suffragettes I think that the slow but sure approach of the suffragettes would have eventually helped women to gain the vote. However although it may be one of the most important reasons as to why women did not get the vote before 1914 it was not the only reason. Even so the suffragettes did help to achieve other good things for women such as fairer divorce laws.