

The fundamental  
change had taken  
place during the  
period 1825 to 1928  
in the oppo...



In 1815 women's rights were severely constrained. Their situation was mirrored by the fact that they had no political rights. The underpinnings behind the prohibition on female participation in politics was that females were seen mentally and physically inferior to males, and that this belief was governed by the divine nature, was widely accepted by both sexes. Women were seen best suited to a passive domestic sphere, rather than men's active political role. It would, however, be erroneous to perceive that women didn't participate in politics.

In 1815 women from all social backgrounds engaged in politics, however the ways they contributed differed from men. Upper-class women acted in a supportive capacity, aiding men they favoured. For e. g. the wives of Disraeli and Palmerston, entertained sympathisers within their aristocratic clique, to bolster political allegiances. Well-to-do women had substantial political influence through men who were eligible to vote, and exercised this influence through patronage.

Through these methods women's welfare were indirectly represented. By 1928 the situation had transformed through various parliamentary reformations, as all women became eligible to vote equally as men, at all levels, due to various short and long-term motives, placing women in a majority of the voting population. One long-term factor was the determination demonstrated by women themselves, as groups or individuals. Political activities by women initially started off as single-issue campaigns, in the 1850's, for better legal rights.

During the same period women, like Emily Davison who felt perturbed about the impediments in female advancements, decided to ensue with matters in other areas, however, later joined the suffrage campaign after realising that drastic improvements would occur if they had direct influence on the government, i. e. right to vote. The development of living standards, like smaller families, resulted to a rise in leisure time, which meant women now had more time to actively seek improvements to be made elsewhere.

Leading institutions like Oxford began admitting females and the concept that women were intellectually inferior thus unable to make rational judgement later disappeared. A significant breakthrough came in 1865 when a prominent Liberal, John Mill, put forward an amendment in the 1867 Reform Bill to enfranchise women. This wasn't to last long, as the proposal was soon vetoed. Though the outcome was unsuccessful, in the following months the first Women's Suffrage Committee was formed reflecting the growing support, by women themselves, for the new issue.

Between 1860 and 1914 there were two types of suffrage movements, the Suffragists and the Suffragettes. Although their objectives were similar, their tactics were distinct. The Suffragist movement emerged in the 1860's. Their members mainly consisted of middle-class women, who campaigned for restricted vote of women, and followed a constitutional path. On the contrary the Suffragette movement, the Women's Social and Political Union, formed in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, had strong links with working-class women thus, campaigned for unrestricted vote for women using a more radical militant approach.

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The Suffragette's claimed militancy was necessary to get their message elevated since the peaceful tactics of the genteel Suffragists weren't working, due to obstinate governments ignorance. The early Suffragist's failed to accomplish their fundamental aim-to secure women's parliamentary vote. Despite that nine women's suffrage bills were placed before the Parliament, between 1870 and 1894, none of these bills materialised.

However they achieved in challenging the stereotypes of affluent women being incompatible with public life, and other significant legal and political reforms, including the turning point of 1869 when single women ratepayers were given the right to vote in municipal council elections. This milestone was the first political success, as unprecedentedly some women were eligible to vote in a formal election. This stimulated supporters in their struggle and paved way for further concessions.

A string of success followed; in 1870 women ratepayers were allowed to vote and stand as candidates for local School Boards and for Poor Law Boards of Guardian. In 1888 women ratepayers were given the right to vote in County Councils. By 1894, women ratepayers were qualified to vote and stand as candidates for Parish, Rural/Urban District Councils. At the start of the campaign the political parties ignored the rights of women and barred them from their party, due to motives including; the notion of ' separate spheres' and consequences of women voting as a bloc.

Surprisingly, by the end of the century the parties were encouraging wider female political participation, thus women began playing a key constituency role. This highlights the gradual change of attitudes. The Conservative's and <https://assignbuster.com/the-fundamental-change-had-taken-place-during-the-period-1825-to-1928-in-the-opportunities-open-to-women-in-political-rights-essay-sample/>

Liberal's formed their own women's organisation; Primrose League (1883) and Women's Liberal Federation (1887). These formations however tended to distract women from the real issue of enfranchisement, and undermined the non-party nature of the suffrage movement, and were one of the factors along with tactical difficulties for the movement disintegrating.

In 1897 16-suffrage groups formed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. However, this formation recognised that various suffrage groups had developed their own characterised identity, thus the campaign was complex in its conditions/operations. Militancy attracted dire publicity and created backlash, which polarised opinions. There were anti-suffragette violence during WSPU marches in 1912, and many joined the constitutional NUWSS in retaliation. The imperative support of majority of the MP's for women's suffrage gained by the Suffragists by 1903 started declining, as 'militancy became the issue' instead of women's suffrage.

Militant tactics alienated key sympathisers including Lloyd George. In 1911 88 MP's had rejected the women's suffrage bill, this figure rocketed by 305%, to 268 in 1913. Anti-suffrage organisations like the Anti-Suffrage League, who claimed that female campaigners weren't adhering to their feminine duties, exploited the situation and won mass support of major organisations including the Church of England (bearing in mind majority at the time weren't secular) and the propaganda machines-national press.

This detrimentally caused to set back the cause of women's suffrage, and reduced the party to a rump; therefore suffragette radicalism was an overall debacle. By 1914 neither the Suffragist nor Suffragette succeeded in winning <https://assignbuster.com/the-fundamental-change-had-taken-place-during-the-period-1825-to-1928-in-the-opportunities-open-to-women-in-political-rights-essay-sample/>

the right to vote. This standstill came to an abrupt end after the Great War, which was an important short-term factor, as it acted as a catalyst to the second phase of the suffrage movement (1903-1918), that helped women attain enfranchisement at a hasty pace, compared to the slow pace years (1860-1903).

The war created employment opportunities for women, who later played a key part in vital industries, and successfully demonstrated that they were competent as men. The war left women considerably independent and aware about disabilities of women rights. Moreover, it made them more confident and critical about their injustices. “ It would have been utterly impossible for us to have waged a successful war, had it not been for the skill and ardour, enthusiasm and industry which women of this country have thrown in to the war”

David Lloyd George. In 1915 all political parties agreed on an interim political ceasefire, and mutually decided to hold the next general election after the war. By that time Asquith’s government had to change the voter requirements, as many soldiers who were away from home during the war became disqualified to vote, on the grounds that they had not been resident for 12 months. The issue of enfranchisement once again came under renewed scrutiny. By the end of the war it became apparent that opposition to votes for women was declining.

Women’s contribution in the war significantly altered the Victorian attitude of ‘ separate spheres’. The ending of the suffragette militancy was helpful

factor, which previously undermined many of the arguments that had been  
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utilised against women's enfranchisement. In 1916 Asquith's government entrusted the issue of electoral reform under the chairmanship of the parliamentary speaker, who concluded that 'some measure of women's suffrage should be conferred' on 'any woman who has attained a specified age'.

Consequently, the Representation of the People Act was inaugurated in February 1918, which enfranchised all adult male and all females over 30. This was another turning point as some women became unprecedentedly eligible to vote in parliamentary elections. All parties were satisfied as it was envisaged that no party would benefit by enfranchising all women over 30, as they were likely to be mature and therefore bring stabilising influence within the political institution, yet it took another decade to gain political equality through the 1928 Act.

The suffrage campaign was not unique as the Finnish suffragists successfully won enfranchisement (1906), similarly the Norwegians (1916), and perhaps these developments inspired the British suffragists/suffragettes. This was a short-term factor to why the government decided to enfranchise women. The growth of democracy was a long-term factor, which encouraged women to campaign for their enfranchisement. Following the First Reform Act there were several demonstrations by the Chartist movement, who campaigned for the universal suffrage of male.

At first the government was not so keen to do this, however this stance changed during the 1860's as both the Liberals and Conservative were

considering extending the voting rights to some working class men. When <https://assignbuster.com/the-fundamental-change-had-taken-place-during-the-period-1825-to-1928-in-the-opportunities-open-to-women-in-political-rights-essay-sample/>

the Second Reform Act was passed (1867) adult male householders and lodgers with one years residence in towns were enfranchised, in effect it gave male artisans the right to vote. When the Third Reform Act (1884) came along the government stepped a stage further when it enfranchised male householders in the countryside.

The fact that the government had enfranchised working-class men stimulated supporters, to pursue their case further. If working class men were granted the vote why not the middle-class schoolteachers who thought them their 'three R's'? There are numerous reasons to why it took so long. One of these reasons is the fact that most men didn't have the right to vote before 1884, so it was impractical to debate about women's enfranchisement.

Furthermore, many women accepted to the subservient role and many actively resisted the campaign, by joining opposition groups like the Anti-Suffrage League/Mother's Organisation who adhered to the concept of 'separate spheres', and claimed that the suffrage campaigners were in a minority. Male MP's even feared the loss of power as majority of the population consisted of females. Another argument was that women couldn't be trusted to vote independently as their guardians could easily influence them. Thus time was needed to modify these opinions. Conclusion

It would be reasonable to say that by 1928 there had been a fundamental change in the opportunities open to women in politics, as all women became eligible to vote at all levels of the political spectrum equally as men. The

political parties unprecedentedly began considering the issues of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-fundamental-change-had-taken-place-during-the-period-1825-to-1928-in-the-opportunities-open-to-women-in-political-rights-essay-sample/>



majority of the voting population (females). This to an extent is a move away from the Victorian ideology of 'separate spheres' as women now in legal theory were able to engage in the masculine world of politics, compared to the situation in 1815 where they were coerced into political idleness.

However in practice this differed as the ideology still remained in the souls of many men and women, to the extent that some people hold this belief today. Not until 1940's were female MP's taken seriously, as in 1922 there was no ladies lavatory in the Parliament. Today, politics is still regarded as a 'mans business', and political parties are reluctant to choose female candidates, and this reflects the poor number of female MP's.