

The they were
expected to act as

Economics



The traditional view of women before the First World War was that they were inferior to men, both mentally and physically. The main argument against women gaining the right to vote was the belief that they were not able to make rational decisions thus creating a fear of women having extremist views if they had to power to make political decisions and so they would not conform to the traditional views at the time. Women were seen as rulers of the domestic sphere in which they were expected to act as house wives and take care of children. The political and domestic spheres were clearly distinguished as belonging to men and the latter to women. Therefore, the clash of the two spheres was believed to create imbalance and thus allowing women to abandon their roles in the home.

In addition, men were considered as the 'heads' of the house and thus had full responsibility over the household, suggesting that women simply were not expected to 'worry' about the political world. Unfortunately, some women agreed with this view as they felt more comfortable in the domestic world, which inspired movements such as the Anti-Suffragists. The common belief that: "The profoundly educated women rarely make good wives or mothers." (Sarah Sewell, *Women and the times we live in*, 1868) still lingers in the twenty-first century as women are forced to choose between their careers and domestic life. However, the political landscape has changed extremely and evolved reducing this belief as a result of years of social and political movements conducted by women.

Firstly, the Suffrage movement began in 1866, however, even with many attempts to give women the power to vote, the campaign was not entirely successful due to a lack of supporters. Nevertheless, in the early 1900s the

Suffragettes were beginning flourish as a result of peaceful campaigns. The leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (The NUWSS), Millicent Fawcett, became a well known middle-class activist that helped the organisation to become more and more popular with over 50, 000 members by 1914. However, this peaceful way of campaigning was not accepted by some of the women within the organisation, including Emmeline Pankhurst, who formed a similar yet more active union called the Women's Social and Political Union (Goskar, 2014).

After the war the NUWSS became virtually a " one-issue organisation" taking a more democratic approach to their movement. The objective was to ' secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women' and to create more influence for women who did not receive the ability to vote in 1918. The 1920s was the beginning of new social movements such as New Feminism that further addressed the issue of unequal franchise.

This finally espoused " the separate taxation of married women" as well as provision of birth control advice and widows' pensions (Pugh, 2000). These were influenced by policies of different political parties, meaning that women were beginning to get more heavily involved in the political sphere; changing the way decisions were being made and allowing women to have a voice. This greatly influenced different Acts and policies that were formed later on such as Trade Union reform and Employment Rights Act. The enfranchisement of women in 1918 was the beginning of women gaining power in a male orientated world, thus, in fact, being an enormous influence in changing the structure of politics forever.

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The First World War, which started in 1914, could be argued to have been the catalyst when it comes to the idea of women becoming a part of the political world fully. As men went off to war women were given the power to control the domestic sphere as well as entering the industrial work place. They were finally given the responsibility to take care of the household in, both, private and financial way. New employment and new areas of work such as transport and police duties were given to women in order to ensure stability in Britain during the war. By 1918 there were five million women working in Britain which perhaps introduced a new generation of independent women who were no longer satisfied with their roles as a domestic house wife.

The first female police woman, Edith Smith, was hired in 1915, playing a major role in blurring the idea of women being inferior to man, especially physically. By 1917 munitions factories, which primarily employed women workers, produced 80% of the weapons and shells used by the British Army (Airth-Kindree, 1987). This, once considered a man's job, depended on women. Women's employment rates increased during WWI, from 23. 6% of the working age population in 1914 to between 37. 7% and 46. 7% in 1918 (Braybon 1989, p. 49).

The traditional female employment was collapsed during the First World War allowing women to pursue other careers, which did not necessarily involve house work perhaps offering women place in the political world that was once considered to only belong to a man. By 1931 the percentage of domestic servants, who were largely made up of women, dropped from 13% to below 8% clearly highlighting the rise equality. This was mainly due to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-they-were-expected-to-act-as/>

alternative employment opportunities that the war offered women that proved their capability to do physical as well as mental work. This also increased wages for women due to having equal jobs to men in addition to emphasising their independence. This gained much support after the war rewarding women with the right to vote.

The twentieth century was the beginning for women's involvement in civil society. Middle and upper class women became more recognised as they were given a range of roles to portray. Many women became writers and campaign activists including fund-raising, canvassing and reform campaigners. (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2001). Likewise, working class women gained more of a voice in the society helping promote the Independent Labour Party from 1894. Henceforth, allowing women to receive a platform outside of the domestic sphere and become more involved in political and social movements.

The National Council of Women expanded by 1914 as women from different organisation joined together " to represent a uniquely wide range of women in social and political terms". Taking a more political approach the NCW created a coherent movement that inevitably helped women achieve their goal - gaining the right to vote. The 1918 Representation of the People Act was the acceleration of female suffrage campaigns in Great Britain. It was the beginning of women becoming acknowledged in the political world. Women of property over the age of 30 were given the right to vote. However, this was portrayed as a reward or a privilege due to the work they have done during the War.

The pre-war acts of the suffragettes were seen as radical and thus some MPs hoped that the Act would ensure the stop to the extreme actions such as violent protests. The Act however focused on women over 30 due to the belief that they would be able to understand politics more and would be less likely to support more extreme ideas. Nevertheless, as the war approached Britain, political parties such as the Liberals and the Labour Party began to move towards democratic reform which included supporting enfranchisement for politically less known groups, and women were a part of such group. This support grew even larger during and after the war since their participation back at home proved to have helped stabilise what was left of the British economy. Whether the war served as a catalyst to the recognition of women or simply changed the perspectives of politicians, it allowed the Representation of the People Act to ensure a beginning and a future for women in politics hence changing the political landscape of Britain. The women's movement during the war exerted pressure on the voting system as not only were they campaigning for women's rights to vote but also for other less privileged, lower class groups.

However, the right to vote was not only undermined by parties such as the Conservative Party but also by other women who believed that their place is in the domestic sphere. The Woman's National Anti-Suffrage League which was established in 1908 had a mission to oppose women being granted the vote in the United Kingdom's Parliamentary elections. The Anti-suffragists who later joined with Men's League for opposing Women Suffrages in 1910 became the National League of Opposing Women Suffrage. This included other women actively campaigning against women's right to vote:" Anti-

suffragists felt women had total domestic freedom in their own homes and it was going against the laws of nature to shake-up the status quo. Men thought this was a great philosophy; leave the “ little woman at home” while they made all the important business and political decisions.” (Hazard)The Anti-suffragists also argued that women were inferior to men also as citizens due to the physical differences between men and women that prevented women from fighting in the war (Carnevali and Strange, 2007, p. 101).

Furthermore, the Anti-suffragists also believed that women were the more passive gender and their priority was to help men become better people. This emotion driven propaganda caused the suffrage movement to become less successful prior to the war. The unsuccessful attempts of the Suffrage movement, on the other hand, meant that the success in enfranchisement of women that was to come later was going to make a larger impact.

Contrastingly, women from all around the world were inspired to create social and political change.

For example, Margaret Bondfield, the first women cabinet minister, founded the first trade union for women as well as being part of Women’s Labour League. She was determined to win the vote for lower and working class women as well as the wealthier through her work as an advisor for Liberal Government (Claytor, 2006). Winning the right to vote also inspired other Acts such as the Abortion Act in 1965. The Abortion Act allowed women to terminate a pregnancy at their own free will, this was a major change in the social as well as political world as it gave women power over their own body. In 1975 The Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act were introduced

further empowering women through the destruction of the illusion of women being inferior to men.

An event that further shaped the political history, was Margaret Thatcher becoming the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain. This meant that women were beginning to be viewed as equal in the political world.

Successfully she was also the longest serving Prime Minister of the twentieth century who also “ reduced the influence of trade unions, privatized certain industries, scaled back public benefits and changed the terms of political debate”. Moreover, she proved to be a strong female leader placed in a male orientated field, allowing women to feel more empowered. Finally, the enfranchisement of women in 1918 fuelled a chain of change that hasn't stopped reshaping the way the political world is run not only in British politics but also in countries such as the U. S. even in recent years.

To this day, women are influenced to fight for equality and equal rights for women all over the world, and this must be due to the reshaping of the political world throughout the years. Hilary Clinton is an example of a woman who has changed the course of history in both male and female worlds when she became the first woman in U. S.

history to become the presidential nominee of a major political party. The role of the secretary of the state also provided Hilary Clinton with the power to cause change such as focusing women's rights and human rights in order to educate and raise awareness on issues that might arise. Likewise, the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Leader of the

Conservative party has proven, once again, that women can have enough power to govern a country.