

Impact of the first world war on women's rights in the uk



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To what extent was the first world war the most important factor in improving women's rights between 1900 and 2017 in the UK?

The First World War was one of the many factors that helped in securing the improvements of rights for women in the years 1900 to the year 2017, however it is debatable to what extent the first world war played in improving women's rights overall, as other factors like the Second World War, organisations and key individuals also had a significant effect which could have been more influential than world war one. Key people like Emmeline Pankhurst and Diane Abbott, and organisations like 'The women's social and political union' and the suffragettes also played a key part in securing women's rights as their efforts led to the equal pay act of 1920 and trade unionists founding the national joint action campaign committee for women's equal rights. These factors, and even more factors like changing social attitudes, also led to change not only politically, but socially and economically too, and it is debatable whether or not these factors had more of a significant effect than the first world war. However, each of these factors did have limitations that held them back from being fully effective and influential on the women's movement.

The First World War had both its limitations and strengths when it came to influencing the women's movement and its progress politically and socially. While the war created opportunities for women in the workplace in both agriculture and industry, and showcased that women could do 'men's' jobs, were skillful and were actually capable of taking part in society, women were still resented and not treated fairly; despite all the war propaganda encouraging women to get involved, motherhood was still glorified and

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emphasised which is quite contradicting. However, due to the absence of men in the home, women started to become the head of the household and had control over managing the domestic affairs, which was a significant improvement for women domestically, as prior to the war, it was always men who were the head of the household and the ones in charge, women would have no control over important issues in the home. This really showed that women could handle the jobs their husband used to do, and that there's really no reason, to not allow them to do it, therefore it really influenced the changing social attitudes in men towards women. We can see the impact the first world war had from Arthur Marwick, who was a professor in history, and that said, "The war experience brought a new confidence to women, dissipated apathy and silenced the female anti-suffragists." [5] in *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1914-1990*, published in 1991, almost eighty years after world war one. This historian interpretation is saying how the first world war created a change for women socially, and that it basically brought up topics that were not really spoken about before the war due to this new power and confidence that women had gained from their actions during world war one.

While the first world did lead to the 1918 Representation of the Peoples Act which gave the vote to most women over the age of 30, it was not completely successful as it only applied to certain women, and was excluding those under 30, yet men under 30 could vote, so there was not full equality there as the law was different for men and women, which really showcases that the first world war did not achieve equality and women's rights to a full extent. We can also see the impact of the first world war being questioned

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by Paula Bartley, in *Votes for Women 1860-1928* (1998), where she says “The significance of women’s war work in the achievement of the vote is therefore perhaps not as great as first assumed”(4). This shows us that at first the first world war was this great motivator for the women’s movement and for gaining the vote, but in reality it wasn’t that impactful as after the war was over the women’s ‘war work’ was essentially pointless, as its effect did not last beyond the war years. While it did partially lead to the vote for women, again, it excluded certain women limiting the success. In addition to this, due to the first world war ending, women were forced back into their previous status and domestic life, out of the jobs they managed to get. Women were also still not allowed to attend university or become an Mp, while men could. So while the first world war did help to progress women socially, it was only for a short amount of time, as after the war years, they had to return to their lives prior the war, and no change had been made in terms of that. Politically, the first world war was somewhat impactful as it did help contribute to the vote being gained, but it was not the only factor working towards this, and the vote, while it was an advancement in women’s rights, was not completely successful as it only applied to women over the age of 30, therefore the first world war was not the most significant factor in securing women rights, but it was influential.

Another factor that affected the progress of women’s rights was individuals like Emmeline Pankhurst and her involvement in the suffragette movement in the 1900s. Emmeline Pankhurst was born into a family with a tradition of radical politics and she also married Richard Pankhurst who was a lawyer and a supporter of the suffragette movement. Emmeline did a lot of work to

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help women progress, like founding the Women's Franchise league and the Women's Social and Political Union. As part of her protests with the suffragettes, Emmeline was arrested many times, and also went on hunger strike, as a result this caused the government to pass the 1913 'Cat and Mouse' act, where they would release hunger-striking prisoners and then re-arrest them when they were strong and healthy. Because Emmeline was a key individual people looked up to in the feminist movement, the fact that others would also participate is no surprise, and it is probably what made it so popular and effective was that so many women were taking part in it.(2). Another individual that helped was Dianne Abbot, who is a British labour party politician, however some of her views differ from that of the party policies. For example, Dianna protested for a women's right to choose when it comes to abortion, and supported a number of 'pro-choice' amendments on the The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, and protesting for extending abortion rights under the abortion act 1967 in Ireland. However, Abotts work and activism did not work as nothing changed within parliament and no amendments were given to the acts she was trying to change. In contrast, Emmeline Pankhurst, despite the events occurring 90 years prior, had more of an impact, as her suffragette work and participation in protests did contribute to the 1918 Representation of the people act. To sum it up, the work and actions of key individuals such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Dianne Abbot, slowly but eventually did help to progress the women's movement and the struggle of trying to secure women's rights. In fact, the actions of Emmeline Pankhurst in particular were more significant and had more of an impact than the first world war.

The Women's liberation movement was a global effort, but was also big in the UK. The Women's liberation movement was a feminist movement which took place from the 1960s to the 1970s. At a miss world competition in in November 1970, demonstrators were protesting for free abortion and equal pay. At this protest, the demonstrators were arrested for assault; they were throwing flour bombs, tomatoes and stink bombs. However, their aim was not to be arrested but to be publicized, which worked as they gained widespread coverage in newspapers and on television. The movement was successful, despite people being arrested at protests, as women's voices became stronger and the protests did in fact cause some laws to be passed that affected women. For example, in 1970, the equal pay act was passed. This act ensured that men and women would receive equal wages for doing the same work, which was big step forward in terms of equality. As well as this, in 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act was passed which outlawed sexual discrimination in the workplace. A year later, in 1976, the Domestic Violence Act was passed, this act was for women in an abusive marriage, it enabled married women to obtain a court order to prevent any or further violence and exclude their violent partner from their home. Prior to this however, the women's liberation did cause some other laws to be passed for example, The Women's aid Federation act which was formed in 1974, which provided support for women and children experiencing domestic violence. The fact that an organisation like this was able to pass laws like this in the government shows their power and how much of an impact that they had. To conclude, the women's liberation movement was significant. Despite the organisation partaking in semi- violent protests at times (which were controversial), they still managed to have an impact both socially and

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politically, with them giving women a platform to speak and protest for what they wanted, and their efforts managed to lead to major laws at that time- and today- being passed which had a serious impact on women's lives.

Another factor that impacted the history of women's rights was world war two, both during and after, as propaganda led to all women (particularly unmarried women) participating in the war effort with 7 million women in war work, but the after effects also had an everlasting impact on women's rights culturally. During the war time, women took up many 'male' occupational roles, for example, working in factories and doing hard labour, women produced munitions, and built airplanes and ships. Women also took up job roles like air-raid wardens, drivers for fire engines, trains and trams, however there still wasn't equal pay as women was being payed 5.3% less than men. In December 1941, the national service act, it was declared that single women who are aged between 20 to 30, were liable for service in either the women's auxiliary services or in the munition industries. In addition to this, in February 1942, the employment of women order, it stated that all women aged between 20 to 0 had to be employed through employment exchanges. World war two did have an impact on women's right, albeit more negatively than positively. Not only did the second world war showcase that women can easily take on the same roles as men and do the job just the same, they also had the chance to escape the normality and traditionality of their domestic lives in the early 1940s (which for some women showed them that women didn't deserve to be treated the way that they were). We can see this through the war propaganda aimed at encouraging women to work (1). This source shows a woman in the same

position as a man to encourage them to join the war effort but also give them false hope as they were not actually treated the same. Also, during this time, many women Mps in parliament developed a sense of 'cross-party cohesion' rather than being loyal to just their own party, making them more involved in government. The source is very valid in conveying what women actually experienced during the war, but from a first look creates the false idea that during the war women were treated equally (which they were not). However, the second world war also had its setbacks. Even though, the second world war gave plenty of job opportunities for women, socially they weren't really given anything, as trade union and employers (who the majority of were men) attitudes did not change, they were the same as their pre-war views and they viewed women and their contributions as a temporary thing, which was basically a last resort due to the men being gone. There was also inadequate nursery provision, which was a thing that woman strongly wanted, as well as the fact that equal pay still did not exist and jobs were still segregated. In addition to this, all the women who were working during the war, was ready to give it all up for their pre-war lifestyle due to the little rewards and change that their work/contributions got them. Women during this time were not ready to challenge their traditional stereotypical role in society. To conclude, the second world war while it did have an effect, it was mostly negative as it changed nothing politically as no legislation was actually passed, and socially things mainly remained the same after the war.

The Dagenham women's strike of 1968 also had an impact on women in society. The strike was led by key individuals being Rose Bolana, Eileen

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Pullen, Vera Sime and many others on the 7th of June. The women working there, sew car covers, and as stock ran out car productions were halted, the workers were angry and the protests were over equal pay and their status in the unions grade. The protests and their effort eventually led to the Equal Pay act of 1970 being passed, which made it illegal for men and women to have separate pay scales. However, the protests also inspired trade unionist to found the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for women's equal rights. This event despite the cause being fairly negative, ended up with a significant outcome, as a major law was passed a significant organisation was passed too. Therefore, the Ford Dagenham strike played a fairly significant part in securing women's rights as it did pass a law and socially created a chance for change, and for this reason I believe it was more effective than other factors like the first world war despite the war still being effective.

Another important factor in securing women's rights, can be said to be a key individual named Margaret Thatcher. Margaret Thatcher was a british stateswoman, and leader of the conservative party, but eventually became the first female prime minister of the united Kingdom on the 4th of may, 1979 (she was also the first female prime minister in the whole of europe too). This in itself was a major success for the women's movement, to have a female in a really important position of power like prime minister socially shows women they can actually do jobs that are traditionally given to men. Another thing she did that made an impact, was her forceful style of leadership that created an everlasting effect on britain, and the fact she won three majorities. However, it is controversial the actual impact she had on

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the women's movement due to the fact she was notable for being 'anti-feminist', yet still somehow affecting the women's movement. For example she often tried to set herself apart from the feminist movement by saying things like "i owe nothing to womens lib" [3] and "the battle for womens rights has been largely won" [3], whether or not it was to seem tough or perfect, but her attitude was very problematic and made her seem ignorant to the issues of her time, which were in fact still going on and were never solved. Being in her position and the fact she was a woman, gave her the chance to make serious change, which she abused. However, the fact she was the first ever female prime minister in the whole of europe changed the social attitude people had on what women can really achieve politically. To sum up, Margaret Thatcher did not do anything politically to help progress women across the country, or the women's movement, however she did create an attitude change socially, just because of her position politically being so unusual for a women at that time. But it certainly was not as significant a factor as the first world war was.

To conclude, the first world war obviously did have a significant impact on improving women's rights during the early 1900 years, as it was a major event that allowed women more freedom, both in the job sector but also socially and verbally let them speak out about the issues they wanted to change. It was effective and very significant as it led to the 1918s People's Representation Act and the Equal pay Act, however it still had its limitations as women were expected to go back to their pre-war lifestyle, and the legislation that they achieved and worked so hard for to get, still had its setbacks and was not inclusive enough, it did not include everyone as it only

applied to women over the age of 30 years old. So, while it was significant in securing women's rights, it was not the most important factor, as there were key people like Emmeline Pankhurst and movements like the Women's Liberation Movement which achieved many more inclusive laws- like the sex discrimination act and the National service act - and improved women's lives socially and politically. For this reason, I believe the first world war was an important factor when it comes to things that helped to progress women's rights, however it was not as important and effective as other key events in history due to the little change it actually had in society and politically for women, later on in the 1900s.

<http://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-ii-1939-1945>

(1) Women in Britain 1900-2000, Annette Mayer, page 90

(2) Feminism a Very Short Introduction, Margaret Walters, 141, Page 84

(3) <http://womensuffrage.org/?p=549>

Historian Interpretations:

(4) Bartley, P. B (1998). Votes for Women, 1860-1928. (Illustrated ed.). : Hodder & Stoughton,

(5) Marwick, A. J. B. M (1991). A history of the modern British Isles, 1914-1999. (Illustrated ed.). : Wiley, 2000.

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