

**Essay on Women's Suffrage Movement (1890-1939)**

## **Women's Suffrage Movement (1890-1939)**

### **Introduction**

The Women's Suffrage Movement time from 1890 to 1939 was a period of transformation in the early 20th century which has been forever cherished in the history of mankind as a constant struggle of women for political and social rights. This time's window saw women who were standing up against the serious economic, political, and social hurdles to get the voting rights and equal opportunities. The movement's influence did not only stop at voting, but it also contributed to societal changes in a broader sense and redefined the role of women in society.

The Women's Suffrage Movement from 1890 to 1939 was a catalyst for tremendous economic, political, and social changes which brought a new look at women's roles and societal structures.

### **Research Question**

How was the Women's Suffrage Movement from 1890 to 1939 touching on and directed towards economical, political, and social structures in the USA and the UK and what were the main factors and characters that brought these changes?

### **Economic Dimension**

At the end of the 19th and the dawn of the 20th century, women suffered a lot of economic hurdles which held them back from financial freedom and economic participation<sup>1</sup>.

Mostly stuck at home with their kids, women who had a lack of formal education and job

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<sup>1</sup> Josie Cox, "The Story of How Women Have Fought for Financial Freedom and Equality," Next Big Idea Club, accessed July 26, 2024, <https://nextbigideaclub.com/magazine/story-women-fought-financial-freedom-equality-bookbite/48529/>.

opportunities were largely concentrated in domestic roles. Employment options were primarily restricted to low-paying jobs in household service, textiles, and teaching. The U.S. Census of 1900 shows that only 5.6% of married women were employed, which reflects societal norms that discouraged female employment<sup>2</sup>. On top of that, women received far less compensation than men for the same job, with wage disparities reaching up to 50% in certain sectors. Property rights not being granted and legal barriers imposed on women's right to enter contracts were the main reasons that made economic disadvantages worse.

These obstacles together made it hard for women to acquire financial security and independence, thus, reaffirming their position as second-class citizens in society. Emmeline and Susan were some of the women who had big ideas. They advocated for gender equality in politics and employment. There was a time when Emmeline led a group that propelled changes in the UK<sup>3</sup>. She made people understand that it was necessary for women to have their right to work first so as to think about equal pay and jobs later. Susan worked on numerous campaigns in America. She also advocated for working rights and female ownership of property. She said money must be earned by women before they can hope to achieve the vote or right to power. This resulted in new legislations that granted women more property rights globally.

Women are now voting. The duties that women get involved in have changed due to this. This enabled some women to find jobs. That is why the ladies could speak up for themselves. They were fighting for equal pay and decent workplaces. The American women got their

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<sup>2</sup> Evan Roberts, "28 Th Social Science History Association Conference," *PUMS*, 2003, <https://users.pop.umn.edu/~eroberts/evanrobertssshapaper.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Chiara Paganelli, "Inspiring Thursday: Emmeline Pankhurst - WOMEN against VIOLENCE EUROPE," WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE EUROPE, February 21, 2019, <https://wave-network.org/inspiring-thursday-emmeline-pankhurst/>.

suffrage in 1920. It was a major victory for them politically and legally. In England, many women got the vote from 1918 onwards<sup>4</sup>. This increased their powers of participation in decision making whether directly or indirectly through pressure group politics aimed at influencing government policy. Women could enter the job market.

Indeed, there were also associations of working people formed by women who wanted to be paid well and not take risks while working. For instance, one of these associations was the Women's Trade Union League that was used as a platform for advocating better working conditions. The 1930s data show a constant rise in the number of females gaining employment especially in the white-collar jobs, which depicted that suffrage brought about a better economic situation<sup>5</sup>. All in all, the right to vote gave women the power to pressure the government to introduce reforms that improved their financial well-being and career prospects.

### **Political Dimension**

The political scene before the Women's Suffrage Movement was full of bias against women's rights. The United States and the United Kingdom were places where women were completely cut off from political life<sup>6</sup>. They had no right to vote and only a few women were in legislative bodies. This exclusion dated back to the time when it was considered a norm in society that women were inferior to men who were more competent in decision-making and

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<sup>4</sup> UK Parliament, "Women Get the Vote," UK Parliament (UK Parliament, 2019), <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/>.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Yellen, "The History of Women's Work and Wages and How It Has Created Success for Us All," Brookings, May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/>.

<sup>6</sup> History.com Editors, "Feminism," HISTORY (A&E Television Networks, April 8, 2022), <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>.

brainwork. The initial voting right of the Constitution in the United States was not for women, and in fact, it was explicitly stated in some state laws that they were not allowed to vote. The Representation of the People Act of 1832 in the United Kingdom was also a case where women were not allowed to vote. The act further regulated the definition of voters as "male persons" thus explicitly excluding women from the electoral process.

Politics was not meant for the women. They were unable to have a say in their lives. Women got voting rights in the USA in 1920 but they fought hard for it<sup>7</sup>. The 19th Amendment states, "No person can prevent citizens from voting on account of gender." In 1918, women achieved suffrage in Britain through various means including attention, connection and sometimes bending of rules for the desired outcome by them as collective.

In the United Kingdom, the Representation of the People Act 1918 was a very big step in the path of the legislative accomplishment<sup>8</sup>. This act gave the right to vote to women over 30 who met some property requirements, thus, there were about 8.4 million more women added to the electorate board. This limited enfranchisement was a tactical means to placate the worrying people who were not in favor, regarding the voting rights for women. The Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 granted voting rights for women in the UK on a par with men, thus, for the first time, all women over 21 could vote regardless of property ownership. These

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<sup>7</sup> National Archives, "19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote (1920)," National Archives, February 8, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/19th-amendment>.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Arenas, "The British Representation of the People Act (1918) | towards Emancipation?," hist259.web.unc.edu, 2018, <https://hist259.web.unc.edu/the-british-representation-of-the-people-act-1918/>.

laws also played a crucial part in bringing along the change in the political arena, giving women the opportunity to exercise their rights fully in the democratic systems.

People such as Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline Pankhurst were the ones who succeeded in moving the suffrage movement forward and making political rights available for women on whose hands key figures like Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline Pankhurst were. Susan B. Anthony, a leading American suffragette, was totally popular and famous for her active participation in the cause<sup>9</sup>. She was instrumental in forming the National American Woman Suffrage Association which worked for women's right to vote. Anthony persuaded Congress and state presidents. Her unshakable hopes led to the success of 19th Amendment. Pankhurst headed British suffragettes through WSPU established in 1903. They demonstrated on streets and starved themselves. She advocated for action with her catchphrase "act, do not talk."

Through their efforts, voting rights of women were brought to the attention of the public. Women's suffrage had an impact on politics in both USA and UK. Suffrage for women resulted in the increased representation of women in political offices and decision-making roles. In the US, the number of women in elected positions has risen sharply which has determined the legislation on such issues as labor rights, education, and healthcare<sup>10</sup>. Women in the UK added new angles to political dialogue and decision-making by being part of the electorate. Women's political participation resulted in more holistic and larger policies, thus mirroring the variety of

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<sup>9</sup> HISTORY.COM EDITORS, "Susan B. Anthony," HISTORY (A&E Television Networks, March 9, 2010), <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/susan-b-anthony>.

<sup>10</sup> Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Kim Parker, and Renee Stepler, "Views of Gender in the U.S.," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project (Pew Research Center, October 18, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/>.

population needs. This evolution accentuated the necessity of gender equality in wells running democratic.

### **Social Dimension**

Before the suffrage movement, the status of women in society was significantly lower than that of men. The situation was such that women could hardly live as free citizens due to the social attitudes and legal systems that were in the favor of men. Women were mostly kept in domestic roles, where they were in charge of household duties and child-rearing, with a small chance for personal or professional advancement. Education for women was mostly about domestic skills and not any academic or professional development. The 1900 U.S. Census showed that only 2% of women had a college education, which showed the belief that higher education was not necessary for women.

In the US and the UK, women were the least part of public life and the political one. The female gender was not allowed to participate in taking part in politics. There is less financial independence for women too. Married women didn't own property or receive a wage. By law, husbands owned everything. An example of this British statute is the concept of coverture<sup>11</sup>. Legally married women were invisible. Besides, these restrictions developed from norms that made females inferior. Obedience and household chores were what women were taught to do all their lives. Those who did not follow the socially accepted ways of life experienced ostracism as an aftermath of it all. Women had no voice, no dependence at all.

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<sup>11</sup> Moshtael Family Law, "The Coverture Doctrine & Family Law," Moshtael Family Law Orange County, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.moshtaellaw.com/blog/2019/october/the-doctrine-of-coverture-family-law/>.

The Suffrage Movement played some role in raising awareness about the rights of women. Women participated in parades and lobbied against female abilities and roles' stereotypes. The attention paid by the public to women was serious indeed. This gave room for discussion on matters which pertained to women. The suffragettes could change the way people thought Public demonstrations like strikes, protests and marches organized by associations such as NAWSA and NWP drew large crowds all over US<sup>12</sup>. For instance thousands attended 1913 D.C parade during Wilson's inauguration.

At that time there was a strong indication of a movement gathering enough momentum to obliterate old connotations concerning passive politically indifferent women. In Britain, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was more militant under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst. The new women's rights movement's women's suffrage movement adopted some very militant strategies that included hunger strikes, civil disobedience, and public demonstrations, which kept the issue of women's suffrage in the headlines. The WSPU's slogan "Deeds, not words" was not only a motto, but it also perfectly illustrated their attitude and highlighted the urgency of their demands<sup>13</sup>.

Media coverage of those happenings was indeed a major factor in the change of people's minds. At first, the suffragettes were depicted in a negative light and portrayed as troublemakers and radicals. However, with time, their persistence and the justice of their cause attracted greater

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<sup>12</sup> The Library of Congress, "TACTICS and TECHNIQUES of the NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN," 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/static/collections/women-of-protest/images/tactics.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Kerry McInerney, "Reclaiming Space: Enacting Citizenship through Embodied Protest during the British Suffragette Movement," *Gender Place and Culture*, August 24, 2023, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2023.2249260>.



sympathetic support. The framing of their fight in terms of universal rights and justice was the way that suffragists began to persuade the public. Reports and opinion polls from the beginning of the 20th century are a sign of increasing approval of women's suffrage, which reflects a progressive change of the public point of view.

The dimension of socialization of the Women's Suffrage Movement is long-term and multi-layered, and it is exceedingly difficult to measure the contemporary achievement of women's suffrage in a scale and proportion of these processes. The empowerment of women led to further social development, which attracts attention even now. One key event was the re-definition of gender roles and the face of societal expectations. The power of the suffrage movement made women's positions and capabilities absolutely visible and caused deep questioning of the outdated paradigm postulating women's biological incompetence.

The new legislation opened up fields such as education, work and politics for women. In the twentieth century, women's contribution to menial labor has highly increased. Women have therefore advanced from being 20% of the labor force in 1900 to almost 43% by the 1970s, which meant that they had more money and became more skilled. Conversely, this was done through feminist campaigns that fought against patriarchy and legislation. Moreover there were a number of legislations such as Equality Right Amendment (1923) and some state laws that gave women more rights over their property and earnings in America during this period<sup>14</sup>.

The first time the United Kingdom did something enriching in this field was the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, which allowed women to work in courts and government

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<sup>14</sup> higgs, "American Equal Rights Amendment – Participedia," participedia.net, December 12, 2023, <https://participedia.net/case/12969>.

institutions that had been exclusively run by men. It is therefore considered as an important contribution to their development in terms of social and economic statuses. Again, the suffragette movement acted as a landmark for women's empowerment programmes that were fought all over the globe, on gender equality issues<sup>15</sup>. The battle strategy behind suffrage dynamics consigned it to young generations so they could join in the fight for gender balance that was taking place then. Feminists who came up during late sixties and early seventies and focused on matters like abortion rights, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment etc., are direct successors of suffragettes.

Also, as far as women's education is concerned, this movement has brought about a transformation in the situation. In the first place they were few but by the middle of 20th century girls constituted the majority in colleges and universities in America. Consequently, more and more women are getting educated thereby resulting into larger percentage of workforce with superior talents who are also diverse ethnically hence making society at large to gain from this.

### **Conclusion**

Women's Suffrage Movement during the period from 1890 to 1939 was the main driving factor for the changes to economic, political, and social systems. In their endeavors to acquire equal rights, the women went through numerous obstacles of great magnitude that in effect reshaped their status in society. The movement's successes among them include the 19th Amendment in the U.S. and the Representation of the People Act in the UK, which not only

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<sup>15</sup> Bonnie Eisenberg and Mary Ruthsdotter, "History of the Women's Rights Movement | National Women's History Alliance," National Women's History Alliance, 1998, <https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/history-of-the-womens-rights-movement/>.

granted voting rights but also initiated a more comprehensive change of society. This is what yet underlies the equal gender opportunities and social equity struggle of the future.

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