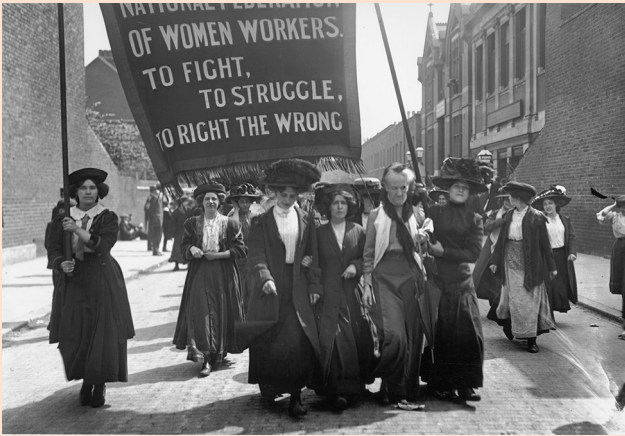




CASE STUDY 1.1: THE WORK OF THE SUFFRAGISTS/SUFFRAGETTES TO EXTEND THE FRANCHISE

Photo 1.3 Suffragette march in London, March 1911.

Source: Topical Press Agency/Getty Images



Events

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the franchise was extended to include more men. This led to a growing sense of injustice and a new movement emerged to campaign for the right to vote for women with two factions dominating the movement: the Suffragettes and the Suffragists. In 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (Suffragists) was formed, led by Millicent Fawcett. The organisation believed in making change happen through peaceful means and to raise the issue in debates in the House of Commons. In 1903, angered by the lack of progress in Parliament, Emmeline Pankhurst among others formed the Women's Social and Political Union (Suffragettes) with the motto 'Deeds not words'. The Suffragettes believed that peaceful, parliamentary means of achieving change had been exhausted and they committed to direct action and civil disobedience to achieve the vote. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed to give the franchise to women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification. Only about two-thirds of the total population of women in the UK met the criteria and could vote. It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that women over 21 were given the right to vote and women finally realised the same voting rights as men.

Significance

The right to vote for women was a massive shift from 1868 when the MP John Stuart Mill's bill to extend

suffrage to women was met by derisive laughter in the House of Commons. The question is, how was this change achieved? The first emphasis tends to fall on the Suffragist movement and the unsung groundwork that they did: petitioning, letter writing, producing pamphlets with their arguments and fundraising alongside peaceful demonstrations such as the Great Pilgrimage of 1913. The aim was to garner public support as well as the support of MPs in order to make the change inevitable. The Suffragettes became increasingly frustrated with the slow progress of change and saw the Suffragists as being way too optimistic about the Liberal government bringing about universal suffrage. This led some to argue that it was the militant tactics adopted by the Suffragettes, including destroying letterboxes, smashing windows, cutting telephone wires, burning down properties owned by politicians and carving slogans into golf courses, which forced change. The tactics adopted, including the most high profile when Emily Davison chose to throw herself under the King's horse at the Derby, lived up to Pankhurst's view that, 'You have to make yourself more obtrusive than anybody else, fill all the papers more than anybody else if you are really going to get your reform realised.'

The fear of the return of this sort of activism after the First World War may well have persuaded MPs to grant women's suffrage. Even if that is the case, questions still remained over the conflict between their aim of achieving votes under the law and their tactics of breaking the law. Critics believed this approach was counterproductive because it alienated public and parliamentary support, and many MPs thought it showed women were unfit to have the vote. Finally, the arrival of the First World War saw the campaign put on the backburner as women from the movement committed to war work with great achievements in many areas, such as science and engineering. Many felt it was inevitable in light of the contribution of women that the vote would be granted after the War. The debate continues about whether the influence of Suffragists or Suffragettes was more important. There can be little doubt that the struggle from below forced Parliament to pass the changes that granted women the right to vote.