

Why did a campaign for women suffrage develop in the years 1870 - 1914?

Throughout the course of this essay I will explore the harsh life that most women faced during the nineteenth century and the uphill struggle that proved to be triumphant in the twentieth century. Life was unbearable for the female of our species during the nineteenth century. The status for women was appalling and all men shared sexist views. Women had no rights. They were forced into saying, doing and even thinking what men wanted them to think. They had no legal standing and no bearing in the make up of contemporary society.

Before the push for suffrage in 1870, women had no legal status. Any money a married woman earned from her job would legally belong to her male spouse. As did any of her children and any property or other form of inheritance that may have been descended upon her. Politically, women could not vote in general or even local elections. Instead, important bills were passed under the guidance of all men and the bearing that any woman would hold over the topic would not be taken into account. Women were allowed to earn a limited wage and their job options were also ruthlessly restricted. Women were made to be possessions of men and even their children would be taken away if their marriages would happen to fail. Maternity rights ripped away from them as males dominated civilization. The push for suffrage was the light at the end of a long tunnel. But in order to reach that light, many laws had to be passed, battles fought and sacrifices made.

In the nineteenth century, women were nothing short of slaves for men. They were told what; how; why and where to do everything. They were not allowed to use their own minds, instead men controlled their lives and everything they did. Why? Because women were the 'inferior' sex, of course.

Women understandably couldn't put up with this torment much longer therefore the push for suffrage was embarked upon. There are many reasons as to why this emerged. These include political, social, economical and legal.

The status of women before 1870 as far as the law was concerned was abysmal. Women were not given any legal standing. All earnings that a woman may earn from her job, was not paid to her but to her husband. In fact, her property and her goods were also given as possession of the man under the law. He owned the house and land regardless of whether it had been inherited by the woman. It was given to the man to do as he please with it. Children were also property of the man. If the marriage were to fail, the mother would not be given guardianship of the children and would not be permitted to visit her child. In 1792, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Structures on Political and Moral Subjects' was written by Mary Wollstonecraft. She claimed that women should be treated as human beings and not objects. Her book was inspired by the ideas of liberty associated with the French Revolution and the politician Tom Paine's 'Rights of Man'. Although it made a number of valid points a century later women were still struggling to improve their legal status. This was the beginning of a push. All women recognised that they did have a voice and that if they tried, they could make a change, they could revolt.

In 1870, the 'Married Woman's Property Act' was enforced. This new bill allowed women who live with their husbands to keep their earnings. This followed the

'Matrimonial Causes Act' of 1857, which allowed a wife deserted by her husband to keep any money she earns. This new law abolished the need of a private Act of Parliament in order to gain a divorce. A divorce court was created and women could sue for divorce, although it remained a social stigma. In 1878, the 'Matrimonial Causes Act' made it possible for a wife to separate from her husband on the grounds of cruelty and was legally entitled to claim maintenance and custody of children. This was extended to desertion in the 'Married Woman's Property Act' of 1882. In 1882, a new bill was enforced. The 'Married Woman's Property Act' allowed married women to share the same rights as those who were single. The woman could own any inherited property or land until she chose to give it away. She was also able to choose to whom she wanted to give it away to. This combined with the law passed in 1870 and had the effect of making it legal for women to keep their money and property when married. Four years later, the 'Guardianship of Infants Act' came into force. This allowed mothers to become legal guardians of their children if the father dies. Legally women were being given more and more rights. Their chance of attaining their goal of suffrage was nearing, thus by the end of the nineteenth century their legal position had improved considerably and the rights for married women had been acknowledged. However the attitude that the male was the 'head of the household' was still very much in place.

Economical standings were equally as poor. Women were given limited jobs and poor pay for hours of backbreaking work. Women and the work they were allowed to do was divided into sections depending on class. Middle Class women were seen as child bearers and were not allowed to undertake any other job. The servants would do all the housework. If a middle class woman remained unmarried and poor because her father died leaving nothing to support her, she would find earning a living extremely difficult. Women were not allowed to enter such professions as law or medicine therefore often the only option open was to become a governess. The governess was underpaid. She would be treated as a servant and she would be an outcast between the servants as she was from a different class. This career was avoided if possible. Working Class women worked in mines, factories, and mills and on the land. Female workers were paid considerably less than men even though they would work as hard for the same amount of time. Many women worked from home, for example taking in laundry, sewing clothes or making matchboxes. The home-workers were very poorly paid. The major form of employment within women was domestic service. This particular type of work involved women acting as servants. One in three unmarried women were forced to be servants. The pay was even lower than factory work and the hours exhilarating. Servants were lucky to be given one day off every month. Mothering Sunday was originally given to allow servants an opportunity to see their parents. Being a servant was considered to be a 'respectable' job and good training for marriage.

Many of the laws involving the status of women and the legal system also contributed to the economical situation with women. These laws include the 'Matrimonial Causes Act' of 1857, which allowed women to keep the money they earn after the couple had been separated. This was extended by the law set in 1870, which allowed women to keep their wages while living with their husbands. Also the 'Married Woman's Property Act' of 1882 allowed women to keep their property. In 1886 the 'Married Women (Maintenance) Act' was passed. This forced all men who desert their wives to pay towards her keep. These laws do not seem much, but it was a

drastic and clear improvement from the dastardly situation that awaited them prior to 1914.

Socially, women were substandard to their male 'equivalents'. Only the select few would get the miniscule education on offer. Many conclusions can be drawn up as to why this is. These reasons include the fact that men may be anxious that if they were to give women a chance to excel and receive a proper education to match that given to men, women would surpass them, winning this ongoing rivalry. Also, it is believed that women would not need an education, as their fields of work did not see this as a necessity. No education was needed for an 'unskilled' job in the factory or in the farms. Also women were outcasts in society, as they were not allowed to fulfil many privileges bestowed upon men in the nineteenth century. Women were not given much of a social life. The church played a major role in the lives of nineteenth-century women, giving them a social life and interests outside the home. As moral standards rose society lagged in certain areas, and many women rose to the challenge of addressing those problems that had been overlooked: poverty, prison reform, child labour, alcoholism, education, and wife beating (as it was known). By the early nineteenth century alcoholism had become rampant. While men were allowed to drink openly, respectable women typically didn't. This, along with other double standards had unforeseen consequences.

It wasn't a surprise that women would wish to overturn these prejudices based on their gender. Many bills would arise and laws enforced to invalidate these social and educational acts of discrimination, which clearly defaced society. In 1870, the 'Elementary Education Act' was imposed. This new law allowed women to be elected on to school boards and upon taking their position on this board, be allowed to vote on school board elections. Three years later, a huge step was taken as Emily Davie established Girton as the first female university college. This was soon followed by another mammoth milestone as London University admitted female students for the first time in 1878. These two landmarks were vital as they showed the significant acknowledgment that women have the potential to let their capabilities shine through. Although these changes were far from revolutionary, they did change Victorian attitudes towards education of women, not least the erosion of the belief that women did not have the intellectual capacity to cope with a high level of study.

Women could not vote in general or local elections. Women could not stand as Members of Parliament. Men would make the political decisions on behalf of women, leaving all females without a voice, without a say and without a nationally broadcasted opinion. Most men agreed with MP, Charles James Fox when he addressed the nation by telling them that, "Women would simply vote as their husbands or fathers told them so it was not worth giving them the vote." This sexist, prejudiced and discriminating view was shared by most of Britain's male population and as long as they remained blinded by the truth, this was the stance that politics held on the situation.

The advances politically were not vast at first. They remained to have very few opportunities to take part in political affairs. Their participation was limited to local government. In 1869 the 'Municipal Corporations Act' gave single women and widows who were ratepayers the right to vote for Municipal councils. This was a start

and allowed women to build on this foundation block as they pushed for their ultimate goal of suffrage and equality. A year later, in 1870, as a result of the 'Education Act', women ratepayers could be elected to and vote on School Board elections. However when the local education authorities replaced school boards in 1902, women were declared ineligible for election. In 1894, women were given the right to serve as Parish and District Councillors on urban and district councils. This was another significant achievement in the battle to change a corrupt sexist society into one that is impartial and honourable. In 1897, the NUWSS (National Union of Women Suffrage Societies) was formed. This encouraged the fight for simple rights and equality and gave women a group to join and a way in which to have a say and express opinions to change Britain. In 1900, married women were allowed to vote for London County Council. A gradual process was beginning to unwrap and a push for more political presence was evident. It was clear that women had come a long way and this was exemplified as another union, the Women's Social Political Union (WSPU) came to ground and a clear political perspective unearthed and began to emerge.

As the push for power and presence in society came through, it was clear to see women were able to overcome the prejudices of gender and gradually begin to have a voice. Women conquered the morale crushing taunting and demoralising victimisation by men as they ridiculed women because their argument was initially treated as a joke. However this 'joke' unearthed to become a beautiful plan in the attempts to force laws to be imposed to eradicate problems in social, educational, political, legal and economical regions. This was only possible due to endless campaigning and persistence. The gender-based division had been broken and both sexes were much closer to being united by 1914. Although the hieratical structure of which jobs and privileges were distributed was not completely annihilated, it was made slightly fairer allowing women to have a say, an opinion, a voice.