What was the social, political and legal position of women in the 1890s?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this lesson you will:

- learn about the inequality of the sexes in 19th-century Britain
- assess the changing social, political and legal position of women in the 1890s.

The inequality of the sexes in 19th-century Britain

In 19th-century Britain, men and women were not equal. Economically, women were dependent on men; socially, they were expected to be obedient to men; legally, they had fewer rights than men. The range of employment open to them was very limited, and in any case, married women were not expected to work. As late as 1911, barely 10 per cent of married women were in paid employment.

Despite this position, attitudes towards women were slowly starting to change. Even before 1890 some marriages were coming to be seen as more of a partnership of equals. By 1882 laws had been passed to allow women to keep their own incomes and property when they married. An increasing number of middle-class couples began to use contraception, which reduced the size of middle-class families and brought an improvement to their quality of health and life. Many doctors were against the use of contraception however, arguing that it would cause women to suffer ‘a mania leading to suicide’. Contraceptives were too expensive for most working-class families. Despite these changes, until 1891, a man could legally imprison his wife in her own home. Until 1925, children automatically belonged to their mother's husband. Legally then, little significant progress had been made.

GETTING STARTED

Historically, women have always been treated as second-class citizens. Examine the statements below and discuss with a partner why you think these beliefs a) originated and b) continued into the modern age?

- Women are the weaker sex, both physically and emotionally.
- A woman must have a man to protect her throughout her life. She should never be left alone.
- Women should never be educated in schools or attend university.
- Women cannot be professionals such as doctors or politicians.
- A woman should not own property; all rights and privileges should pass from father to son.

SOURCE A

Cartoon showing inequality experienced by women in British society at the beginning of the 20th century.
How was British society changed, 1890–1918?

Until 1870, any money a woman earned belonged to her husband. Until 1882, once a couple were married, the woman’s property belonged to her husband. Until 1891, a man could legally imprison his wife in her own home. Until 1925, children automatically belonged to their mother’s husband.

**Fact file**

- Until 1870, any money a woman earned belonged to her husband.
- Until 1882, once a couple were married, the woman’s property belonged to her husband.
- Until 1891, a man could legally imprison his wife in her own home.
- Until 1925, children automatically belonged to their mother’s husband.

From the 1870s onwards greater educational opportunities led to a number of women entering professional occupations. Many girls’ high schools were founded and women were beginning to be allowed to study at some universities. The London Medical School opened its doors to women in 1878. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was the first woman to qualify as a doctor, although she faced a great deal of opposition. Some men claimed that studying hard would damage women's brains, but Anderson's success proved such ideas wrong. After 1870, with the expansion of education, there was a large increase in the number of women teachers to go with the increasing number of women entering the medical profession. These jobs were mainly taken up by middle-class women. However, more jobs were also becoming available for working-class women. The growth of shops and department stores in the second half of the 19th century created jobs as shop assistants. Although the hours were long, working conditions were better than for those employed in domestic service. The invention of the telephone and the typewriter led to the availability of good jobs in offices. The number of women office workers increased by 400 per cent from 1861 to 1911.

If this was the legal and social position of women, what about the political position? Women’s involvement in local government had been increasing during the 19th century. At this level of politics, the major gain of the 1890s was the 1894 Local Government Act, pressed for by women’s groups. By 1900, there were about one million women eligible to vote at council and parish elections. In 1907 women were given the right to stand as candidates at county council elections. Such advances in local government had come increasingly to be regarded as a means of furthering the campaign for the parliamentary vote.

**Activities**

1. Study Source A. Given what you can see in this image, are you surprised by what Charles Hobhouse says in 1912 (Source B)?
2. Find out more about the social, political and legal position of women in the 1890s.

**History Detective**

Investigate the social expectations of women at the beginning of the 20th century. Compile your research into a short fact file and present your findings to the class.
What were the arguments for and against female suffrage?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this lesson you will:
• learn about the arguments for and against female suffrage
• evaluate the evidence in its historical context.

Changing attitudes

However, by 1900 attitudes were beginning to change. It was becoming easier for women to gain a proper education, and to train for certain professions, mainly teaching. Indeed, by 1914 more girls were staying in education after the age of 16 than boys. Inventions such as the telephone and typewriter brought women into offices, and the development of shops and department stores opened up new job opportunities for women as shop assistants. Young, unmarried, middle-class women in particular benefitted from these opportunities, and as a result could lead more independent lives. It was just as well that they could: Britain’s population was unbalanced, with well over one million more women than men. Out of these social changes, a women’s movement, campaigning for women’s rights, began to develop. By the turn of the century, this movement focused on one issue in particular – women’s suffrage (the right to vote).

Arguments for and against women’s suffrage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arguments for</th>
<th>Arguments against</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Women had as much right to the vote as men.</td>
<td>• It was claimed by some men that politics was an unsuitable activity for women. They said that women had no interest in politics, and would not understand difficult political issues.</td>
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<td>• Votes for women had already been introduced in other parts of the world, such as New Zealand, and parts of the USA and Australia.</td>
<td>• Many women, including Queen Victoria, were against the idea of giving women the vote.</td>
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<td>• Some women (since 1888) already had the right to vote in local elections. Why not in parliamentary elections too?</td>
<td>• There were many more important social issues to be fighting for which would affect the lives of large numbers of women, rather than the vote, which was only really of interest to a small number of middle-class women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Modern women were more independent and educated than in previous generations.</td>
<td>• Not all men had the vote at this time, so why should women have it?</td>
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<td>• It would be democratic to give women the vote. Through the 19th century the right to vote had been given to more and more men – now was the time to include women.</td>
<td>• Almost nobody, not even male supporters of women’s suffrage, thought you could give the vote to all women. But giving the vote to some women (the wealthiest or the most educated) might give an advantage to one political party (probably the Conservatives) over the other (the Liberals).</td>
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<td>• Opponents of women’s suffrage claimed that the violent tactics of some of the campaigners proved women did not deserve the vote.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Women should not be able to vote because they would take no part in protecting the country in time of war (an argument used more and more as war approached).</td>
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How was British society changed, 1890–1918?

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson you will:

- learn about the public response to the issue of women’s suffrage
- assess the successes of the WSPU and NUWSS and consider the wider argument of what is the best way of bringing about political change.

**GETTING STARTED**

As you read through this lesson, plot the events of the women’s suffrage movement on a timeline, noting down the key stages of the campaigns of both the Suffragists and Suffragettes.

The suffragists wrote thousands of letters to the government and they did much to raise the profile of women as serious candidates for the vote. In short, between 1897 and 1914 they worked tirelessly to abolish the myths and negative stereotypes surrounding women in British society. They were pioneering on an international level as one of the first groups of the modern age to champion female suffrage. Inevitably, however, Fawcett and her followers had to show great patience in the face of the male-dominated establishment, who were quite content to let the women protest but had no intention of letting their desires bear fruit.

**The Suffragists**

By the end of the 19th century, the campaign for women's rights was well under way. In 1897 Millicent Fawcett formed the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), which united most of the existing campaign groups into a single national organisation. The NUWSS was orderly, moderate and believed in using peaceful, persuasive tactics. It was quite an impressive organisation. Its members were known as Suffragists. Their campaign was quite successful in getting the issue of votes for women into the public eye, and they won a good deal of support for their cause. Even those who were strongly opposed to the idea of female suffrage could not deny their admiration for the suffragists' devotion to their cause. Their slow but sure approach would probably have succeeded eventually, but some women did not want to wait that long.

**The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) – the Suffragettes**

In 1903 a group of Suffragists, frustrated by the lack of progress made by the NUWSS, broke away and formed their own organisation, the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union). This group was led by Emmeline Pankhurst, and her daughter, Christabel.

**SOURCE A**

Millicent Fawcett formed the NUWSS, which campaigned tirelessly for women’s suffrage. They used peaceful, law-abiding methods to persuade people to support their cause.
Another Pankhurst daughter, Sylvia, was also a leading figure in the movement, but her priorities were rather different. She worked in the East End of London, trying to help improve conditions for poor women in that area. This led to quarrels with her mother and sister, and eventually Sylvia formed her own organisation, the Women’s Suffrage Federation, in protest against her mother’s support for the First World War.

What action did the Suffragettes take?

Members of the WSPU were determined to use direct, and if necessary violent, actions to achieve their aims. The organisation was largely middle-class in nature, which made their noisy, awkward and ‘unladylike’ behaviour totally mystifying to their opponents. They soon became known as the ‘Suffragettes’. At first their campaign consisted of demonstrations and minor acts of public disorder, such as chaining themselves to the railings outside Buckingham Palace or disturbing the meetings of political opponents. However, their frustration increased as, time and again, Parliament discussed but refused to agree proposals for women’s suffrage. They turned to violent, illegal methods, such as smashing windows, arson and assaults on leading politicians.

SOURCE

Our heckling campaign made women’s suffrage a matter of news – it had never been that before. Now the newspapers were full of us. We woke up the old suffrage associations. We had defied the police, we were awake at last. We were prepared to do something that women had never done before – to fight for themselves, for their own human rights.

From Emmeline Pankhurst’s autobiography, My Own Story, published in 1914.

SOURCE

Be very careful not to open suspicious parcels arriving by post. On the other hand do not leave them lying unopened in the house. They should be dealt with carefully and promptly. These harpies [the Suffragettes] are quite capable of trying to burn us out.

A letter from Winston Churchill to his wife, written in February 1913.

SOURCE

Arrests were a common occurrence among the Suffragettes. They brought attention to the movement but were not always desirable.

KEY PEOPLE

Millicent Fawcett – a prominent suffragist and early feminist who became president of the NUWSS. She distanced herself from the violent activities of others and focused on improving women’s educational opportunities.

Emmeline Pankhurst – a leading British women’s rights activist who helped to found the more militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) (the suffragettes) – an organisation that became notorious for its militant activities.
The Suffragette campaign reached a new peak of violence in 1913 when yet again Parliament failed to grant women the vote. There was a renewed outburst of window smashing, cutting telegraph wires and burning empty buildings. Politicians lived in dread of receiving letter bombs. Charles Hobhouse, the well-known Liberal opponent of women’s suffrage, frequently received letters full of grass seed and pepper from local suffragettes who knew he suffered from hay fever. More seriously, there was an arson attack on his home which, fortunately, only succeeded in setting his back door on fire.

**The 1913 Derby**

Events at the famous horse race, the Derby, brought the situation to a climax. During the race, a suffragette, Emily Davison, walked out in front of the horses. She tried to grab hold of one of them, which happened to be the king’s horse, Anmer, but in the collision she was knocked to the ground and fatally injured. She died in hospital four days later. It is clear that her actions were a deliberate protest, probably an attempt to draw attention to the Suffragette cause by stopping or disrupting the race. Many people have assumed that she committed suicide in order to be a martyr to the women’s cause; certainly her death was treated that way by the Suffragettes. However, a return ticket was found in her handbag, suggesting that she only intended to upset the race.

**The reactions of the authorities**

At first many men did not take the Suffragettes seriously. Then they became exasperated as they realised that the Suffragettes were serious and were not going to give up. But above all, the authorities were rather confused about how to deal with them. The problem was that decent, well brought up young ladies were not supposed to behave like the Suffragettes. The fact that most Suffragettes came from middle-class backgrounds, were educated and apparently had quite comfortable lives, made it even harder for men to understand what they were complaining about. The frustration and hostility this caused led to many Suffragettes being very roughly treated by men, who objected to their activities, and tried to break up their demonstrations.

The tactics of the Suffragettes forced the authorities to take action against them. More and more were sent to jail as punishment for their protests. The Suffragettes responded by going on hunger strike. Scared of the consequences of women starving themselves to death, the prison authorities felt they had no choice but to force-feed the hunger strikers, which caused a public outcry and led to widespread criticism. Finally, in 1913, parliament passed what was known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’. This allowed prisons to release hunger-strikers whose health was deteriorating, but once the women had recovered they could be arrested again and taken back to prison to continue their sentence. After her arrest in February 1913, Emmeline Pankhurst went on hunger strike. During the rest of the year she was released and re-arrested on six occasions as she repeatedly went back on hunger strike.
How effective were the campaigns of the Suffragists and Suffragettes?

The Suffragists were the earliest movement to form, and the largest, but in many respects their work, although admired, was overshadowed by the more direct, headline-grabbing activities of the Suffragettes. What they did provide was a structure for political reform and a unifying principle of women's rights that was echoed across the world. Despite their proficient and persistent campaigning their influence was not the driving force in the campaign for female suffrage.

Historians are undecided whether or not the Suffragettes' campaign was effective. They certainly caught the public's attention. The problem was that their violent tactics lost them much of the support which they might otherwise have gained through the justice of their cause. Despite several votes in parliament on the issue, by the time the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914 women's suffrage had still not been achieved. The Suffragettes abandoned their campaign and supported the war effort. As matters turned out, this was the most effective way of achieving their aims. In the end it was not violent protests and demonstrations that won women the vote, but the contribution they made to winning the war.

ACTIVITIES

1 By now you should have completed your timeline of the Suffragists' and Suffragettes' campaigns for votes for women. Look over the timeline and see if you can identify any patterns. For example:
   - Can you see any reasons for the increasing popularity of the Suffragettes?
   - Is there a reason why the Suffragettes might have become more aggressive in their tactics?

2 Complete the three pie charts opposite by deciding on the significance of the Suffragists and Suffragettes in answers to each question. You can be as mathematical as you like and even outline the evidence that explains why you made your choices, but the most important thing is that the charts should have no blank sections and that they reflect your opinion.

   a) Which movement – the Suffragists or the Suffragettes – do you think women would be more likely to support?
   b) Which group posed the biggest threat to the government?
   c) Which group do you think had the most effective tactics?

The work of the Suffragists and Suffragettes proved ultimately futile in the period up until 1914. Their shared objective but wildly opposing methods acted against each other and had a neutralising effect that meant both groups could simply be dismissed by the government. The women's suffrage movement in Britain at the turn of the 20th century would have been much more successful if it could have found a way to unite in the face of adversity, but each side was left to offer only bitter commentary on the other's tactics.
How did women contribute to the war effort?

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson you will:

- learn about the considerable changes in the role of women in British society brought about by the First World War
- categorise and evaluate the range of roles taken on by women and their effectiveness in those roles.

**SOURCE A**

Women working in a munitions factory during the First World War, c.1915.

**SOURCE B**

The employment of women in industry, 1914 and 1918.

How was British society changed, 1890–1918?

Women in employment during the First World War

When the war broke out in August 1914, the women's movement immediately abandoned the struggle for the vote, and leading Suffragists and Suffragettes promised that their followers would devote themselves to the struggle of winning the war. In the first rush of enthusiasm which greeted the outbreak of war, as men flocked to join the armed forces, women prepared to take the places at work that men had left behind. However, to start with, things did not work out quite that way. Only in March 1915 did the government get round to creating a register of women willing to do war work, but even then it failed to find enough work for all the volunteers to do.

However, by this time individual women had begun to find work for themselves as drivers, bus conductors, police, railway staff – all traditionally men's work – but there was no official blessing for their efforts. In July 1915, as a result of growing frustration at how little was being done, the

**GETTING STARTED**

In pairs, discuss the following points:

- If the suffrage groups could not unite before the war, what do you think would have to change when war broke out?
- What benefits if any would a ‘united front’ bring?
- How long do you think that the two groups could work alongside one another?
Suffragettes organised a huge demonstration in London demanding the ‘Right to Serve’. It seemed to do the trick; from this point on, numbers of women entering vital war work of various kinds increased rapidly.

The demand for female labour increased even more after the introduction of conscription in 1916. During the war a total of around five million men joined the armed forces. To keep British industry going, it was vital that their places at work were filled. Women worked in factories, steel mills, driving buses, building ships, or working in agriculture in the ‘Land Army’. Perhaps most importantly, they worked in huge numbers in the munitions factories, making bullets and shells. Some women went to the war zones to help out, and did valuable work in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, and Women’s Royal Naval Service.

For large numbers of middle-class women, employment during the war was the first time they had received their own wage packet and been financially independent from their husbands. For many working-class women, of course, working was nothing new, but the war gave all women a much greater sense of their value to society. Although many women lost their jobs once the war was over and the men returned home, attitudes had changed permanently, and there were never again such clear divisions between men’s and women’s work.

**SOURCE C**

_**I was in domestic service and ‘hated every minute of it’ when war broke out. I was earning £2 a month working from 6.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. So when the need came for women ‘war workers’ my chance came to ‘out’. I started on hand-cutting shell fuses … We worked 12 hours a day … I thought I was well off earning £5 per week.**_

One woman’s memories of working in a munitions factory during the First World War.

**SOURCE D**

_**They appear more alert, more critical of the conditions under which they work, more ready to make a stand against injustice than their pre-war selves. They have a keener appetite for experience and pleasure, and a tendency quite new to their class to protest against wrongs even before they become intolerable.**_


**Grade Studio**

Study Sources A to D. Which source is most useful to the historian studying the role of women in the First World War? [8 marks]

**Examiner’s tip**

In your answer, avoid the temptation to talk about the value of different types of sources just because they are different types. For example, if you said ‘Source B is best. It is a graph and it contains facts. The photograph is just a snapshot’ you would score only 1–2 marks. Remember that the answer to this question all depends on what the historian wants to know. For example, Source A is good for showing what the inside of a munitions factory was like. However, Source B gives us information about how many women worked in munitions factories, compared to women workers in other sectors. Source C describes the feelings of women about working in wartime and Source D tells us one person’s opinion of the effects on women of working in wartime. The trick is to demonstrate that, together, the sources can give us a rounded picture of different aspects of women at work in wartime Britain.

**HISTORY DETECTIVE**

During the First World War, what roles did women take on in your local area? Carry out research using your local library or via the internet.