حق التصويت للنساء في بريطانيا و الحرب العالمية الأولى

المدرس المساعد
بهار عسكر ميرحسن
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية
كلية اللغات – جامعة صلاح الدين
أربيل - العراق

الخلاصة
يناقش هذا البحث بشكل رئيسي تطور حركة التصويت للنساء في بريطانيا وتأثير حرب العالم الأولى عليها وكيف كافحت النساء بشتي الطرق من أجل الحصول على حقوقهن في التصويت. الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هو عرض مواصفات النساء خلال الحرب العالمية الأولى و كيف أثرت هذه المواصفات بشكل رئيسي على مطالبهن. يتناول البحث أيضاً ضعف دور المرأة في المجتمع خلال العصر الفيكتوري وظهور حركة التصويت للمرأة بسبب هذا الدور الضعيف و لكن مع دخول بريطانيا وأوروبا في الحرب العالمية الأولى في أغسطس من عام 1914 و كانت للنساء مواصف حيوية بدعم الحكومة في الحرب العالمية الأولى في بريطانيا، وفي عام 1918، أصدر البرلمان قانون تمثيل الشعب الذي تضمن وجود نساء.
Women’s Suffrage in Britain and the World War I

Assistant Lecturer
Bahar Askar Meerhasan
English department
College of Languages - Salahaddin University
Erbil - Iraq

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the growth of women’s national suffrage movement in Britain and how the women were struggling for their rights. The main aim of this paper is to show the impact of WWI on women’s suffrage and women’s stances during WWI which influenced on the women’s suffrage and gain their vote finally. Actually, the paper tackles the weak role of women during the Victorian age and the appearance of women’s suffrage movement because of this weak role. As well it considers the impact of WWI on women’s suffrage and the significant role of women during WWI and how they could gain their vote in 1918.
1. Introduction

Feminism is both an ideology and a reform movement seeking to improve the status of women. Feminists share a belief that women continue to be oppressed because of their sex. Because females comprise half the population, both men and women play important roles in society, and they complement each other. Today all British citizens over the age of eighteen have the right to vote. But this right has resulted from many hard battles in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when suffrage campaigners fought against opposition from both the parliament and the general public. The principle of women’s suffrage was granted in 1918 and equal franchise rights followed in 1928.

This paper examines the development of the women’s national suffrage movement, which started in 1872 and involved thousands of women who were struggling for their rights. Women suffrage can be defined as the right of women to vote and to stand for office\(^1\). By illustrating women’s positions before and during the Industrial Revolution in British society, the suffrage movement gathered momentum. The role of women and their political, economic, and social opportunities in British society changed during the first Industrial Revolution. So the first part of this paper discusses the historical background of women’s position in British society and why the women’s suffrage movement appeared.

It also explains many bills and petitions introduced to convince the government to adopt women’s suffrage. In addition, it demonstrates the two most influential organisations supporting women’s voting rights. Afterwards the second part of the paper considers the impact of war, particularly WWI, on women’s suffrage and what are the stances during WWI which influenced on women’s suffrage and why they gained their vote in 1918.
2. The Role of Women during the Victorian Age

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, men were masters in their home, which were places to work and live. They had to organize the means of production and discipline the producers. Women and children contributed to work as a matter of course, even if their work was regarded as supplementary. Women were oppressed before the development of capitalism, and they faced inequalities in society. An unequal power relationship between the sexes existed before the dawn of the new economic system.

After the Industrial Revolution, production was shifted to factories, which prompted a new definition of men and women’s social roles. In the middle-class family, man was responsible for the economic prosperity, legal security and social contact with the outside world. Meanwhile women had to be ‘the angel in the house’: she had to run the household, bring up the children, and create a sphere of warmth and harmony (2). Once a woman became married, her personal property belonged to her husband. Since she had no legal autonomy, she could not sign contracts, children belonged to their fathers, and divorce was difficult (3). For the working class, the majority of men and women were forced to work at subsistence level during the Industrial Revolution. Working-class families required both sexes to work for the family to survive. Men received higher wages than women, however, because they were believed to be responsible for the whole family (4). The growth of production and waged labour outside the home changed the interdependent relationship between husband and wife. It means that women could work outside home and gain money not just depending on men.

In addition, these economic changes led to the identification of family life with privacy, home consumption, domesticity and women. Home was no longer central to production and became, ideally, a domestic haven of peace and tranquillity. Therefore, the Industrial Revolution had a significant effect on the position of women; the role of women as a self-sufficient economic unit declined, and capitalism devalued women’s role in production. Women’s place was in the home: the concept of separate spheres had arrived. On the one hand, working-class women became burdened both by the new domestic ideology and by work outside the home. On the other hand, bourgeois women were encouraged to adopt the role of weak and helpless creature, lost without a man and suited to nothing else other than pleasing him and raising his children.
3. The Women’s Suffrage Movement

However, there was no logical inherent reason why women should not share the same rights as men since both sexes are part of a common humanity. Therefore, the women’s suffrage movement was a response to injustice women had experienced(5). The ideas of women’s suffrage and women’s interest in government can be traced back to 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her Vindication of the Rights of Women and said, “For I really think women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed.”(6) Women’s suffrage is viewed as women’s protest against female oppression.

Women not only sought the vote to gain equal citizenship rights, but also as a means to gain the political power necessary to transform gender structures. In 1820, James Mill claimed that there was no need to extend the suffrage to women because their fathers and husbands would protect their interests. In the 1832 Reform Bill, Henry Hunt introduced a petition to grant voting rights to unmarried women who met the bill’s property requirements. But parliament responded by passing legislation explicitly restricting suffrage to middle-class men for the first time. Thus, the Reform Act enfranchised only male individuals.

This was not the last attempt; there were several attempts to revive the issue. In 1838, the People’s Charter initially included women, but later versions changed the demand to adult male suffrage. In the 1850s and 1860s, a group of women led by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes originated an organized women’s movement and met at Langham Place in London. It became an important source of proposals for gender reform in education, employment and politics. They founded a magazine called the English Women’s Journal to convey all these proposals to a wider audience, which encouraged interest in women’s suffrage by printing articles on it in the 1860s. In 1855, members of this group established the Married Women’s Property Committee, which successfully pressed for reforming the law in order to grant married women property rights(7).

In 1865, John Stuart Mill was elected to parliament and was the first person that believed equality could come through reform. He had unsuccessfully proposed a women’s suffrage amendment to the Second Reform Bill in 1866, which enfranchised part of the urban male working class, and this was evident in his book On the Subjection of Women (1869). In his book, Mill argued that the principles of equality and freedom of choice should apply to both sexes, and he criticised the socialisation of women(8).
In 1867, the National Society for Women’s Suffrage, the first organisation to campaign for women’s right to vote, was formed and led by Lydia Becker and became an umbrella organisation. Becker was active in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s and was a member of the Married Women’s Property Committee until 1873. She founded the *Women’s Suffrage Journal* in 1870.

Many women’s suffrage bills were introduced into parliament and had various titles. Some were bills for the removal of disabilities of women, some for the enfranchisement of women, and some for the extension of the parliamentary franchise. In 1870 Jacob Bright introduced the women’s disabilities bill in parliament, but it was rejected after the second reading. In addition, the Married Women’s Property Act was passed to usher in reform regarding married and divorced women’s property. But all of them had the same purpose: to allow women to vote in elections for members of the House of Commons, and the avowed target was to remove obstacles resulting merely from sex.

By 1900 the women’s suffrage movement enjoyed mass support from thousands of supporters. Besides there was a whole range of organisations, such as Conservative and Unionist Women’s Suffrage Association and the Actresses Franchise League, which called for women’s voting rights. From amendments to the 1832 Reform Bill through to Chartism and Mill’s attempt to change the Bill of 1866, the struggle for the vote could be seen as part of the nineteenth-century campaign for electoral reform.

There are many reasons for the support given to the women’s suffrage movement. The first reason was the imbalance in the ratio of men and women. A disproportionally larger number of women prevented them from fulfilling their seemingly natural careers of marriage and motherhood. The opportunity to get married was declining. In the early twentieth century the percentage of unmarried women between the ages of 20 to 45 rose, and marriage opportunities were also hampered by an ailing economy. Another major factor was the inequality of the legal system and how it affected women. The law governing the civil rights of husbands and wives were unjust. The wife always suffered in cases of guardianship of children, tax, divorce, and maintenance. At that time, English law provided women and children inconsistent protection from bad men. Suffragists claimed that voting women would be able to change the law.

In addition, women were sexually constrained and oppressed. Contemporary morality allowed only men to enjoy sex outside of marriage, and the only function for women was procreative, focusing on the ideals of innocence, chastity and purity. Prostitution and the White Slave Traffic were the other side of the coin. Many women preferred the...
ideal of monogamous marriage to the risks of sexual liberation, and they demanded that men live up to the ideals of chastity and fidelity.

The increasing numbers of women in the labor market was also crucial to suffragism. The WSPU had grown out of northern working-class and Labour movement circles while working women were particularly active in the NUWSS. Women worked in many industries, including the textile industry, some professions, domestic service, and the aptly labelled “sweated trades,” where most working women were overworked and underpaid. The oppression of working-class women and their concerns about legislation affecting their employment provided a major pool of support for suffragism.

However, the most evident reason why women supported the suffrage movement was that they were not permitted to vote in parliamentary elections due to their sex. The suffragists asked why women who were doctors, teachers, workers and mothers were unfit to vote, while anti-suffragists replied that it was because political power was based on physical force and a citizen’s ability to use it. In short, the vote would improve women’s position. Having access to political power would lead to higher wages and economic independence, increased job opportunities, improved marriages and child welfare, and legal equality.

Therefore, many opponents of universal suffrage fought against the campaign. First, they argued that the proper work of men and women is distinctly divided by nature. If women participated in politics, they might prefer not to marry, and mothers might neglect their home duties and bring lasting harm to children. That means the woman’s place is in the home as a wife and mother, and men should fulfill the tasks outside that domain.

In addition, the opposition of the Prime Minister, Asquith, was considered the main reason and which explains why votes for women had been substantially delayed. Many bills were introduced by private members but had no chance of success unless the government provided facilities and assistance. When the Liberal party gained power in 1906, many of the suffragists hoped that their aspirations would finally be met. Although this support had long been denied, it was believed the Liberals would now acquiesce. In 1908, Mr. Asquith announced that the government proposed to introduce a bill for further electoral reform, and that if an amendment for the enfranchisement of women were added, he would not hinder it.

But for a while nothing could be done because the country had become absorbed in the desperate struggle between the House of Lords and the House of Commons, followed by swiftly succeeding general elections. If his party dominated the next
parliament, Mr. Asquith promised the suffragists that he would provide facilities for
the women’s suffrage bill to be drawn (16). In 1910, a bill was drafted to enfranchise
women householders or occupiers, but Mr. Asquith refused the necessary facilities. A
vast number of petitions for the conciliation bill came in, and the suffrage societies and
about half a million people marched and gathered in Hyde Park.

But the suffragists could only bring enfranchisement before the country as an
issue (17). A number of organisations were founded during the British women’s
suffrage movement, and each reflected considerable differences concerning matters of
political strategy. The two most important organisations are the National Union of
Women’s Suffrage Societies, 1897-1910 (NUWSS) and Women’s Social and Political
Union, 1903-1914 (WSPU). In 1867 women’s suffrage societies were founded in
London, Edinburgh, and Manchester, and they united to form the NUWSS.

The NUWSS was the oldest, the largest and the most practical organisation of its kind
in the world that fought for women’s voting rights. It was a non-militant and
democratic organisation led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett with over 40,000 members
and more than 400 branches and affiliated societies. It published a paper entitled The
Common Cause, which presented the feminist debate within the National Union.
NUWSS’s main aim was to obtain the Parliamentary Franchise for women on the same
terms as men by peaceful and legal means through presenting petitions and bills to
parliament. It was much more likely to respond to and to reflect the needs of women
than was the autocratic WSPU. Its members were known as Suffragists and were not
only from the middle class but also from the working class (18).

The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed by a small group of
women led by Emmeline Pankhurst from the upper class in 1903, and its members
were known as the Suffragettes. Their motto was: ‘Deeds, not Words.’ Its goal was to
support votes for women on the same terms as men, and it was a militant
organization (19). They claimed to fight for the independence for women, not just for
the vote. The members of this organization participated in several violent actions and
civil disobedience, thinking these actions would force the government to grant them
the vote. Their activities included chaining themselves to Buckingham Palace, window
breaking, violence against members of the government, destruction of property and
disrupting speeches in the House of Commons. Such activities resulted in fines, which
led to the frequent imposition of short prison sentences on militants (20).

In 1909, WSPU prisoners resorted to hunger strikes to protest against the
government’s refusal to grant them political prisoner status. The government took
many measures such as forcible feeding and the Cat and Mouse Act in 1913, which released the prisoners and rearrested them after they had recovered from the hunger strike. In 1911, a bill was introduced, which proposed that the vote be granted to the women householders. The suffragettes felt that they had been betrayed when the prime minister announced that he was about to introduce a manhood suffrage bill. Then, in 1912, the suffragettes smashed a huge number of windows with hammers and stones and set fire to theaters and public buildings. Thus, from 1911 to 1913 the suffragettes truly rebelled against the government. They would not stop until they had achieved their purpose, and they refused to compromise. Their motives were lofty and pure, and that they were willing to endure martyrdom to foster sexual equality. However, those women often caused more harm than good. After all the violent actions they had committed, they often repelled potential supporters. The suffragists confessed that the suffragettes resulted in immense harm for their cause and granting parliamentary franchise to women was indefinitely postponed.

By 1914 Millicent Fawcett considered the WSPU militants to be the chief obstacles to achieving suffrage.

4. The Impact of the First World War on Women’s Suffrage

The First World War had a decisive impact on the fortunes of the movement. At the beginning of the war the politicians called a truce on domestic controversies and turned their attention to winning the war. Women suffragists took the same attitude and declared a truce, both constitutionally and militarily. Both sides recognized that women’s suffrage bills and amendments had failed for nearly a half of century, not because of lack of support within or outside of parliament, but because for want of an adequate bill that thoroughly crossed party lines. There are many reasons of why the vote was gained in 1918. The first reason is women’s contribution to the war effort, which had already taken place before the war began. And many believed the WSPU’s militant actions before the war were responsible for its success since the government feared remilitarization after the war.

In 1916, the pro-suffragist Lloyd George had also replaced Asquith, and the female contribution to the war effort changed the public opinion. It challenged some of the old myths, such as those regarding female physical capabilities. Before the war, women had already worked in difficult and dangerous jobs, but it was not recognized until the war effort. The war was an important factor regarding the suffragists’ decisive success by changing some men’s attitudes towards women. Particularly, it removed many of the political obstacles to women’s suffrage that had existed prior to 1914.
Many suffragists realized that the epitome of traditionally male characteristics of violence, aggression and power no longer rested merely with men. Through women’s work in the factories and the fields, the old myth that the female sex was incapable of physical force or of being involved in the defence of the nation had been deconstructed. The vote was not simply given as a reward for their work during the war or to ward off the threat of renewed suffragette militancy. More importantly, the war removed some of the grounds for opposition to women’s suffrage that had existed before 1914. For example, it changed the relationship between the political parties and it removed the anti-suffragist Prime Minister Asquith. The Pankhursts had suspended militancy so that ‘antis’ could no longer use this as a reason for their opposition to votes for women (24). In 1917, a deputation from suffrage societies met Lloyd George to discuss a franchise bill that might include some women and they raised several issues. Fawcett insisted Lloyd George promise that women’s suffrage be part of the original bill and not be subsequently amended. Although Lloyd George explained to the deputation that the struggle still occurring with anti-suffrage forces, but he assured them that a bill would be introduced and would include women’s suffrage (25).

The main purpose of this point is to show the attitudes of the two main organisations of women’s suffrage and how their attitudes changed after the war had broken out. In addition, to show how women’s work changed during the war and how the female war effort changed public opinion.

4.1 The Stance of NUWSS and WSPU in the First World War

During the war the movement’s activities separated into two groups: those who worked for peace and those who supported the war effort through welfare and industrial work (26). Both the NUWSS and WSPU declared a truce and worked to support the nation during the war. Before the outbreak of the war the NUWSS participated in the great Peace Meeting in London on August 4. But this meeting was canceled due to the declaration of war, and Millicent Fawcette, the leader of the NUWSS who chaired the meeting, advised suffragists to offer their support for the war effort and suspend their campaign (27). Fawcett was the first speaker at the rally. She condemned the war and exonerated women from responsibility for it, and she declared that women must now put aside their precious national and international hopes and exhorted the NUWSS’s members, “Let us show ourselves worthy of citizenship whether our claim is to be recognized or not.” (28) For Fawcett the war was the gravest national crisis that Britain had ever been obliged to face, and she believed that if Germany won, it would mean the destruction of representative institutions.
Helena Swanwick resigned her position on the NUWSS executive in 1915 because of the Union’s wartime policy, and she stood out against Fawcett’s view and declared in her speech that women who wanted the vote have ‘a duty to think out what the war was about, how it ought to end, and what constructive policy to prepare to prevent its repetition’ (29). Anti-war members of the NUWSS wanted to support the peace movement and claimed the women’s movement was an attempt to assert the supremacy of the spiritual over physical force; therefore the NUWSS should seek a negotiated peace. These anti-war members worked in relief work by equipping and staffing of a number of hospital units for soldiers at the front (30). Although the anti-war suffragists were involved in relief work during the war, it did not prevent the split which occurred over its public stance on the issue of war and peace. Fawcett made a belligerent speech and stated that until German troops had been defeated ‘I believe it is akin to treason to talk of peace’ (31). Thus, the anti-militarist stance of these suffragists could not condone supporting the war effort. The decision of the NUWSS to avoid any association with the peace movement was crucial to obtaining women’s suffrage during the war.

For the WSPU, when the government released the suffragette prisoners Mrs Pankhurst and her eldest daughter, Christabel, actively supported the government in its execution of the war. Christabel wrote, “Mother and I declared support for our country. We declared an armistice with the Government and suspended militancy for the duration of the war.” (32) Mrs Pankhurst declared, “We want to make no bargain to serve our country,” which meant that WSPU had neglected their pre-war objectives and wanted to help their country. In 1915, WSPU’s journal the Suffragette had been replaced by Britannia, a platform for the advocacy of military conscription, the war of attrition and the internment of enemy aliens (33). Although the other suffrage societies joined together in 1916 to resume working for women’s suffrage, the WSPU continued to focus on the war and did not participate in the revived suffrage campaign (34). The WSPU’s new strategy involved speaking from recruiting platforms, hounding alleged traitors in the public service, and this strategy shocked some of its former supporters (35).

The well-publicized patriotism of the Pankhursts, and the assiduous work of thousands of women for the war effort dispelled several myths and arguments the antis claimed. Like the NUWSS, the WSPU also faced divisions into two groups: those who
supported the war and a small number separated themselves from the Pankhursts’s wartime policy and formed the Suffragettes of the WSPU and the Independent WSPU. But Sylvia Pankhurst’s Women’s Suffrage Federation became an important centre of anti-war activity, which brought her into close contact with adult suffragists in anti-war organizations(36). Nevertheless, women realized that patriotic duty could serve not only their country, but also the women’s movement and its suffrage goal. One of the wider functions within the movement had always been to support and encourage women by the very act of association in societies. They were not only continuing to do this by recognizing and encouraging women’s welfare, but also by implementing initiatives which were helping the war effort, which would also be of use in the future. For instance, the London Society for Women’s Suffrage (LSWS) was one of the training centers that taught women new skills and could improve and expand women’s future employment prospects(37).

4.2 Woman’s Work during the First World War

Women’s war effort may have been important in converting some opponents and giving the vote to women in 1918. Wartime has been given the credit for many changes in women’s employment. WWI forced many married women into the workplace. On the one hand, unemployment rates for women increased in the first year of the war because the industries hit by the war were precisely those such as textiles, fishing and luxury trades, where women were employed(38). On the other hand, the introduction of women into new areas of work in the war provided the opportunity for one of the most dramatic changes in the lives of British women. During the latter part of 1915 women replaced men in industry much faster than in the first year of the war. Initially women worked in the traditional areas of medicine and relief, where there was no actual replacement of men.

But as the demand grew for men at the front, increased opportunities for employment arose in such fields as railway services, the grocery trade, engineering, architecture, banking, and other occupations previously dominated by men. These activities had insufficient influence on members of the government or parliament to change the electoral status of women(39). During the war, especially in spring and summer of 1915, the Great Procession of Women or the Right to Serve March were organised by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst working with Lloyd George paved the way for many women to work as munitions workers in munitions industry(40). In the following years of war, as casualties increased and conscription was introduced, there was a need
to replace male labour with women in all sections of industry, commerce and service industries. Therefore, women made a crucial contribution to the war effort(41).

For many working-class women the main focus of their lives in war and peace was the struggle to survive. Many of them earned a living in factories and workshops. Furthermore, wealthy women who had stepped in as unpaid volunteers to sew garments for the troops deprived poor women of their livelihood(42). Women still received lower wages than men during the war and still faced poor conditions. In 1916, women campaigned through the Women’s Service Bureau to persuade employers that women deserved equal pay for equal work with men, welding being one such job(43). The exploitation of female industrial workers was to increase as the early unemployment was replaced by an increasing demand for female labour with the development of the munitions industry and the introduction of conscription for men. Women munitions workers were in rooms without ventilation and worked for twelve hours without a break.

One of the most significant efforts was the attempt to get women welders classed as skilled workers. This raised the level of thousands of semi-skilled women in engineering and paved the way for breaking down barriers to women’s employment(44). In addition, the numbers of clerical staff also were to increase during the war due to the increased volume of paper work in all spheres of administration(45). Women’s suffrage organizations expressed divided opinion about the war itself. The WSPU became active proponents of the wartime recruitment of men as soldiers and women as their replacements in the workplace. Thus, the positive side of war was that it offered women a wider range of jobs and meant women could take on a number of traditionally male roles. Their ability to do this led to a change in attitudes. Between 1914 and 1918, an estimated two million women replaced men in employment, resulting in an increase in the proportion of female employment from 24 percent in July 1914 to 37 per cent in November 1918.

**Conclusions**

To conclude, the women’s suffrage campaign was a success story in Britain. The position of women had not been comparable to that of men, and women believed that great changes were necessary to preserve their own welfare and that these changes could only be obtained by enacting female suffrage. Women such as Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst devoted their lives to changing the world and believed women’s voting rights and political power could achieve that goal. The impasse between the government and suffragists was broken in August 1914 when Britain
declared war on Germany. The war removed the main obstacles against women’s suffrage. These included issues such as Asquith’s opposition, WSPU militancy and party conflict over what form the legislation should take. Many anti-suffragists believed that women were more pacifistic than men; therefore, they assumed women could not be trusted to support their country in wartime.

However, women proved the contrary was true, and they changed the public opinion. During the war all these obstacles were removed. The war opened up a wider range of occupations to female workers and hastened the collapse of traditional female employment, particularly domestic service. The effect of the war was to demonstrate that women were capable of a great variety of tasks. In addition, the NUWSS and WSPU changed their attitudes when Britain declared the war on Germany. Although individual members within both organisations opposed the war, greater numbers supported the war effort and served their country. The war can be considered a key element in the granting of the franchise to women over the age of 30 years who held property in 1918.
Footnotes


(20) ibid. p.30


(28) Common Cause, VI, no. 282, 4 Sept. 1914.


**Bibliography**


