

**Suffrage Centenary: A Brief History**

# THE DIVERSITY OF THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT





Princess Sophia Duleep Singh selling 'The Suffragette' newspaper outside Hampton Court in April 1913.

Credit: Museum of London



Sarah Parker Remond, born in 1865, was a prominent campaigner against slavery in the US and UK. She was among the signatories of John Stuart Mill's 1866 petition to the British parliament on women's suffrage.

Credit: Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, US

## ▶ Working-class women

Women were campaigning for the parliamentary vote on the same terms as it was given to men. These terms included the ownership or occupation of property. Therefore women suffrage campaigners only intended the vote should be granted to propertied women. They believed that if they could vote they could influence parliament to improve conditions for working-class women who would not qualify for the vote. It was on this understanding that many working-class women lent their support to what was essentially a middle-class campaign.

Working-class women were particularly affected by reform of the Factory Acts, passed by parliament to protect women from harmful ways of working. However the women themselves saw only that the Acts limited their means of earning a living. Suffrage campaigners, particularly the suffragists who had been working among the women textile workers in Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Cheshire from as early as 1893, promised that when they had the vote the conditions of women's working lives would be more carefully considered.

Although the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) initially drew its support from working-class women, it soon changed tactics to concentrate on attracting more prosperous, middle-class women.

In 1912 Emmeline Pankhurst's second daughter, Sylvia, broke away from the WSPU to form the East London Federation of Suffragettes, hoping to rouse the working-class women of the East End against the government. At the same time the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), now in alliance with the Labour party, began building up its working-class support by actively encouraging working women to join their new organisation, the Friends of Women's Suffrage.

## ▶ Black and ethnic minority men and women

In 1866 one woman of colour signed the women's suffrage petition. She was Sarah Parker Remond, an African-American who lectured on anti-slavery and women's rights. There is, however, little evidence of the subsequent involvement of black and minority ethnic women in the suffrage campaign. This is unsurprising since, although people of colour, particularly men, had long settled in Britain, they constituted a very small percentage of the population until after the end of the Second World War.

It may be that black and minority ethnic men and women did support the women's suffrage campaign but, because it is difficult to discover the ethnic origin of an individual, they are now 'hidden

from history'. At the time of the suffrage campaign census records only documented a person's place of birth which is no guide to ethnic origin because many white British men and women were born in Africa, India, and the West Indies. Only in newspaper reports might an individual's ethnic origin be mentioned and, although the suffrage campaign occupied so much newsprint over the years, no such comments have been uncovered.

The only individuals of (part) West Indian heritage known to have supported the suffrage campaign are Donald Adolphus Knight and John Richard Archer. In 1906 Knight stood by his wife, Adelaide, when she went to prison for demonstrating outside a politician's house. Adelaide was white British and a member of the Canning Town branch of the WSPU. In 1918 Archer, who had been the first black person to be elected as a mayor in London, acted as election agent for Charlotte Despard, the leader of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), when she stood as the Labour candidate for Battersea North.

Historians have searched for visual evidence of black or minority ethnic men and women in the many hundreds of photographs that chronicle the suffrage campaign. Of these only a handful, featuring a few Indian women, demonstrate such an involvement. One, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, was an active member of the WSPU. The others, probably members of the WFL, include Mrs P.L. Roy, the wife of the director of public prosecutions in Calcutta, and her daughter, Mrs Leila Mukerjea. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century another Indian, Dadabhai Naoroji, elected in 1892 as Britain's first ethnic minority MP, had been wholly supportive of women's suffrage.

## Women from all over Great Britain and Ireland

From 1866 the women's suffrage campaign quickly spread throughout England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Speakers toured the country, holding meetings and setting up societies as they went. The women's suffrage campaign owes a lot to the efficiency of the expanding railway system.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most towns had at least one suffrage society, with many having more - for example, branches of both the NUWSS and the WSPU. Suffrage societies spanned mainland Britain from Wick in the northeast of Scotland to St Ives in southwest Cornwall and everywhere in between. In Ireland there were suffrage societies in Belfast and Dublin, with branches in smaller cities such as Londonderry and Cork.

## International suffrage campaigners

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women in New Zealand (1893) and only white women in Australia (1902) had the vote. At this time women from many other countries were campaigning to change their electoral laws. In 1904 Millicent Fawcett was among the suffragists from around the world



The Welsh women's contingent in the Women's Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911. They marched between contingents of Scottish and Irish suffragettes, in the 'Imperial Pageant' section of the procession.

Credit: Museum of London



Edinburgh, women with banner, 1908, photo postcard, unidentified photographer.

Credit: The Women's Library, London School of Economics



Photograph of Indian suffragettes on the Women's Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911. Indian suffragettes, including Mrs Roy, Mrs Mukerjea and Mrs Bhola Nauth marched in the Empire Pageant section of the procession along with representatives from New Zealand, South Africa and the West Indies.

Credit: Museum of London

who founded the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in order to unite their efforts. The IWSA held four-yearly conferences at which campaigners could meet and exchange ideas. For many years its headquarters were in London. The organisation is still in existence, now known as the International Alliance of Women.

## ▶ The role men played

From the beginning the women's suffrage campaign owed a great deal to the active support of men. In 1866 John Stuart Mill MP presented the first petition in parliament. He was also the author of *The Subjection of Women*, which provided the suffrage campaign with its intellectual basis.

Over the years many other MPs presented women's suffrage bills in Parliament, although none were passed.

When they arrived in a town, touring suffrage speakers could always find a sympathetic businessman or a clergyman willing to chair a public meeting for them. This was particularly important in the early years when it was considered hardly respectable for women to speak in public.



Millicent Garrett Fawcett with her husband Henry Fawcett, c. 1880. Henry met Millicent and her sister Elizabeth Garrett through his campaigning for women's suffrage.

Credit: LSE Women's Library

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Frederick Pethick-Lawrence was for many years one of the main financial supporters of the WSPU, while Laurence Housman wrote and spoke extensively on behalf of the WFL. The NUWSS was on the surface less reliant on the active involvement of men, while directly canvassing male voters and carefully cultivating useful relationships with sympathetic politicians.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century men formed their own societies in support of women's suffrage. The Men's League for Women's Suffrage was non-militant, but was prepared to work with the WSPU and the WFL, while the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement was the male equivalent of the WSPU.

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