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Suffragette Struggle: The Fight for Women's Right to Vote

The struggle for women's suffrage has been a lengthy and challenging one, characterized by years of activism, protests, and unwavering determination. Throughout history, women have been excluded and deprived of the basic right to partake in their country's political affairs. However, brave women and their supporters have tirelessly campaigned to change this reality and ensure voting rights for all.



The 19th Amendment in the United States, which prohibits the denial of voting rights based on gender, was first proposed in 1878 and finally gained enough support from both parties to pass the House and Senate in 1919. It needed to be ratified by three-fourths of the states, and by March 1920, 35 states had done so. However, it wasn't until Tennessee ratified the amendment in August of that year that it was officially passed, allowing women to vote in the 1920 presidential election. Following the passing of the 19th Amendment, suffragists rebranded themselves as women citizens, marking a unique moment of unity among women. However, the unity seen during the suffrage movement diverged post-amendment as women embraced various political causes.

Despite differing ideologies, women were unwavering in their commitment to influencing politics and public life with the resounding message, "We have come to stay."

Rather than viewing the 1920 amendment as the conclusion, it is better understood as the commencement of a new chapter in women's political engagement, one that is constantly evolving throughout American history. Commemorating the 19th Amendment centennial is important, but it is vital to recognize it as a stepping stone in the ongoing narrative of women's political activism. Meanwhile in Britain, After the 1867 vote, the formation of the London Society for Women's Suffrage took place with the goal of peacefully advocating for women's right to vote. Similar groups were established nationwide, leading to the creation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1897, headed by Millicent Fawcett, the sister of the UK's first female doctor, Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson. The NUWSS utilized various methods to promote their cause, including petitions, letters to politicians, speeches, and posters. While they gained some traction and expanded their membership, by 1903 some members felt frustrated with the lack of progress and believed more assertive actions were necessary due to Parliament's inaction.



The push for women's suffrage was not always peaceful, as in the early 1900s women resorted to more attention-grabbing tactics that often resulted in punishment for expressing their views.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, along with her daughters Christabel and Sylvie, founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and became known as the suffragettes. Their motto was 'Deeds not words.'

The suffragettes believed in direct action and deemed the peaceful tactics of suffragists ineffective. Some of the methods they used included chaining themselves to Buckingham Palace railings, setting fire to the homes of anti-suffrage MPs, burning down churches, and breaking windows on Oxford Street.

As the WSPU's actions became more militant, the government took a harsh stance by banning women from political gatherings and imprisoning those involved in violent acts.

While in jail, they endured poor conditions including worm-infested food and dirty beds. Alice Paul went on a hunger strike until forced by doctors to eat. Despite the hardships, many women continued to fight for their rights, believing it was important to keep the movement in the public eye.

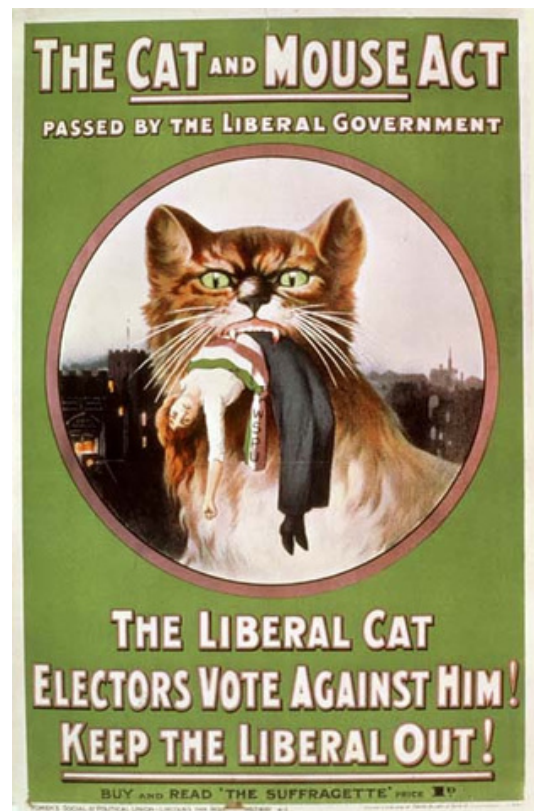
For example, in 1917 alone, 218 women from various states were arrested for picketing outside the White House in Washington, D.C. One of these women was Alice Paul, a suffragist who led a silent protest with a thousand women in January of that year. They faced verbal abuse and physical violence from anti-suffrage individuals, and were eventually arrested for allegedly blocking sidewalk traffic.

Despite the challenges and pain they endured, the suffragettes remained resilient and determined in their fight for equality. Their sacrifices and bravery paved the way for future generations of women to exercise their right to vote and participate in the democratic process. Their legacy serves as a reminder of the power of perseverance and the importance of standing up for what is right, even in the face of adversity.

The pain and suffering experienced by the women of the suffragette movement were immense, but their bravery and determination ultimately led to a monumental victory for women's rights. Their sacrifices should never be forgotten, as they serve as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the continued fight for justice and liberation for all.



Campaign experiences varied for women from different social classes, with working-class women facing harsher treatment in prison compared to their middle- and upper-class counterparts who often received better conditions due to family connections. While the suffragette movement was primarily made up of white women, women of colour also played an active role, such as Sophia Duleep Singh, an Indian-born suffragette who was a key figure in the campaign against paying taxes. Unlike some suffrage movements in other countries, the suffrage movement in Britain did not discriminate based on race and supported the right of all women to vote.



The Suffragettes faced regular arrests for their activism, leading some to go on hunger strikes while in prison. To prevent these women from becoming martyrs, the government approved the force-feeding of hunger striking prisoners, despite the risks involved. This controversial practice continued for four years, despite growing public outrage. In 1913, the government passed the 'Cat and Mouse Act,' allowing ill hunger-striking prisoners to be temporarily released from prison before being re-arrested once they had recovered.



In the United States and Britain, as well as in numerous other parts of the world, the hard-fought battle for women's suffrage eventually led to the recognition of women's right to vote. The 19th Amendment in the United States and the Representation of the People Act in Britain marked significant milestones in the journey toward gender equality in political representation. However, even as these victories were celebrated, it's essential to acknowledge that the fight for full equality is far from over. Women, particularly those from marginalized communities, continue to face barriers to voting rights, including voter suppression tactics and discriminatory laws. Moreover, achieving the right to vote was just the beginning; ensuring equal representation and addressing systemic inequalities in political participation remain ongoing challenges. As we commemorate the struggles and triumphs of the suffragettes, it is crucial to recognize that the fight for gender equality in all aspects of society, including politics, persists, requiring continued dedication, advocacy, and solidarity. The legacy of the suffragettes serves as a reminder of the progress made and the work yet to be done in the pursuit of justice and equality for all.

