

## THE SUFFRAGETTES IN 20TH CENTURY ENGLAND: WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION GROUP

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### Summary

This study examines the fight for women's suffrage in England through the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline Pankhurst. It analyzes the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill on its ideology, as well as the group's radical tactics, including property destruction and hunger strikes in prison. The contradiction in Pankhurst's leadership is highlighted, as she advocated for equality while running the movement autocratically.

**Keywords:** suffragism, Emmeline Pankhurst, WSPU, feminism, women's suffrage, England, radical activism.

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## Introduction

With the creation of the social group of the Women's Social and Political Union by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, a change in English politics was achieved. This group was basically led by middle-class women, although later they succeeded in incorporating working-class women. This group exerted a particular pressure to achieve the goal of women's right to vote, which was violence, justifying it with the government's indifference to yield to their demands.

Thus, for this group to have ideological foundations, its precedents were the texts of Mary Wollstonecraft "Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and John Stuart Mill "The Subordination of Women", who influenced the suffragist group and in particular its leader, Emmeline Pankhurst, taking action so that their petitions for women's right to vote would be heard.

In this sense, the concepts of equal opportunities of both Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill were taken up by the group because they argued the importance of an education for both sexes, for which women went against what was established, challenging the domestic slavery in which they lived, without the opportunity to emerge education and have the possibility of obtaining a space in the public sphere, an issue that the militants of the Social Union began to demand with the protests in London, provoking the reaction of public opinion.

In this way, the suffragist movement in England at that time was a current that began clamoring for the suffrage for women because both socially and politically they were invisible and even replaceable, without enjoying a community of equals, so the suffragettes were those who fought for the composition of gender equality.

Likewise, the leaders at the beginning of the movement did not embrace the idea of mixing with working class women, however, seeing that they were those who really possessed the strength, since they were the majority of women who assumed more weight within society, they opened their doors looking for the masses to unite for this cause, which produced great pressure both politically, trying to modify the laws in Parliament, and socially, where working women protested against the exploitation they lived.

Also, the Social Union's way of exerting pressure was through violence, destroying property clandestinely, with the use of fires and bombs to pressure the liberal government with the intention of gaining access to suffrage, for which the government ended up allowing them to continue attacking valuable property because of the cost this caused. Because of this violence, women were imprisoned as a means of channeling the number actions they took.

This is how the women members of Emmeline Pankhurst's group who had been imprisoned for a certain period of time, Gupta (2013) explains that, "they introduced new participating tactics, such as starvation, without prior approval" (p. 36) (Own translation). Moreover, to such women, torture was applied inside the prison as a kind of scolding for their rebellions, where Gonzalez (2010) explains what caused this,

Hunger strikes also began among the imprisoned women, in protest against their treatment (as common criminals and not political prisoners) and as an alternative means of vindication. [The forced feeding of the prisoners, with the introduction of tubes via the larynx, led to infarcts, infections, nasal perforations, mouth ulcers, pneumonia and various other repercussions (p. 20-21).

Therefore, Pankhurst's group supported the female working class because of the violence they unleashed, which was paramount to achieve the vote, it was a defense mechanism in which they participated in every possible way. The suffragette women of the lower classes joined their campaigns because they showed that the vote was a fundamental mechanism to achieve bargaining power with men, although in the group there was no democracy since only the leader was followed, without being able to add opinions of the participants, so they had to be reduced to what Pankhurst planned as strategies.

In this order of ideas, dealing with the leader of the group, Emmeline Pankhurst, it is possible to explain her ideological conception and her authority in the group. Pankhurst was an autocratic person, where Purvis (2002) states that "she could be gentle and fearful, idealistic and realistic, creative and destructive, kind and ruthless, democratic and autocratic, invincible and vulnerable, brave and fearful" (p. 24) (own translation), thus understanding that she was a woman with contrasts and contradictions in her way of being. Thus leading the Social Union, she proclaimed herself dictator, electing herself and a few women as "standing committee", in Mrs. Pankhurst's own words:

The WSPU is not hampered by a complexity of rules. We have no constitution and bylaws; nothing that can be amended, manipulated or discussed at an annual meeting. In fact, we have no annual meetings, no business sessions, no election of officers. The WSPU is simply a suffrage army in the field. It is a purely volunteer army, and no one is obliged to remain in it. (Purvis, 2002, p. 115 - 116) (Own translation)



Emmeline Pankhurst

Thus, it was clear that remaining in the Social Union was not obligatory; if someone did not agree with the way it operated, they could leave the group without any objection because the leader knew that they were operating autocratically and not all of them considered it fair.

Also, on March 24, 1908, Emmeline gave a lecture on the importance of suffrage, for which Purvis (2002) notes that “the lecture offered a feminist analysis of the gender divisions between the sexes that disadvantaged all women, while highlighting the plight of poor women and arguing the case for social reform” (p. 123) where she tried to explain that widowed women had no claim on their husband’s property if he had not left it to her.

Therefore, Emmeline gives the vote a fundamental importance, where she was the one who spread this message, in an autocratic and strong way, without digressing in any sense about the arguments that she exposed to all men, parliamentarians, common men, lecturers, among others, so that they would really understand from the perspective of the vote.

The work they suffered from not having the opportunity to choose the direction of their lives in any possible scenario.

That is why if one considers what Emmeline Pankhurst did and the way in which she proposed her group and carried it out, it could be said that she was a socialist in having included low-class women in the Social Union, but not a democrat at least in her way of carrying out the group, knowing that they had many experiences that others did not, because they were not in the need to work in factories for hours, which produced an important effort by them, making them be taken into account when deciding suffrage.

On the other hand, the Social Union was the only group in the English suffragette movement whose actions were truly violent, self-sufficient in character, using different strategies from the other suffragette associations. Also, two events set the tone for the group's strategies: first, the failure of the Conciliation Act in 1912; second, the First World War in 1914; and third, the Representation of the People Act in 1918.

Likewise, Curry (1977) explains that the two events marked in the suffragette movement a before and after in the strategies that the WSPU was to out, thus, the author points out that:

In short, the hypothesis is that the long range strategy of the W.S.P.U. was to adopt increasingly militant tactics until the government conceded or exhausted its opposition powers, but this strategy would have been discontinued whenever there were favorable opportunities for negotiation with the government and with third parties. This hypothesis has three corollaries. First, these strategies developed in a logical pattern, alternating between increasingly militant periods and increasing favorable opportunities for negotiation with groups from other movements. Second, the failure of the third Conciliation Bill in 1912 resulted from the Union's reluctance to negotiate with the government, its refusal to recognize third parties, and its failure to communicate the threat of increased militancy if defeated. , the success of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 (which granted women's suffrage) resulted from the Union's willingness to negotiate with the Government and with third parties, and its success in communicating the threat of increased militancy, if it were defeated again. Notably, the publicly unpopular guerrilla militancy of 1912-1914 probably communicated this threat. (p. 19-20) (Own translation)

Actually, the use of violence by the WSPU began in 1908, but it was on the militants' own initiative as an agitation and complaint to the authorities for the arrest of women just for peacefully protesting, as well as the way in which women were being treated prisoners, with force-feeding to those on hunger strike, so that they began to break windows in London's busiest avenues (Holton, 1980).



It is expressed that it was an action, at first, of the militants because the leaders of the group, that is, Emmeline and her daughters, did not agree at that time to use violence, but finally accepted it as a deliberate policy during the demonstrations.

Kaiser (1995) explains that in 1908 the WSPU's tactics were carried out by public petitions and not by demonstrations of popular support because it had not worked to pressure Parliament:

Precisely calculated threats limited to law and order were seen as the answer. By linking suffrage protests with that of the unemployed, the WSPU's rush of the House of Commons that year would find its leaders again on trial, only this time facing the more serious part of inciting the public to riot. The recruitment of the unemployed had the intended effect of suggesting the possibility of a suffragist threat to public order, but it was not until 1909, and the government's refusal to grant political status to suffrage prisoners, that violent attacks on public and private property were introduced. Initiated at first by members of the (p. 49) The window campaign quickly became an official WSPU tactic as it provided an effective demonstration and the means for a quick arrest and safe escape for the assembled crowds (p. 49).



In this sense, the tactics used by the group were threats and damage to public and private property, where their protests began to be violent to such an extent that the window campaign was what opened the door to public knowledge, made them popular in the , knowing that the arrest would be seen throughout the country. In addition, in 1912 was where more violence was used, reaching the extreme with very strong strategies, because when the protesters were arrested they were tortured and they suffered from infections, nasal perforations, mouth ulcers, among other repercussions.

On the other hand, with World War I, women took over the men's jobs. In 1915 the government asked Emmeline Pankhurst to gather women to work because men were being drafted into the war and civilian jobs had to be filled at the time, which , it could be determined that women were an important economic engine that supported wartime, establishing an important alliance, making it known that women were just as capable as men to perform their jobs, basically affirming in full action that women could take their places without a problem, any opposition to women's suffrage had vanished because of the effectiveness that women had fulfilled in men's jobs, in addition to having supported the government. Consequently, in 1918 the Law of Representation of the People was passed, which granted any woman over 30 years of age, housewife, wife of the owner of the house and university graduate, the right to vote. In spite of the restrictions, it was an important step towards the fact that in 1928 all women over the age of 21 could vote on equal terms with men.

In conclusion, it could be said that as a result of the incorporation of working class women in the Social Union, a strategy of violence began to be used to pressure the government, where Emmeline Pankhurst adopted a much stronger position than before, with a decisive leadership, In which the members of the group did not have the right to order, but only to follow Pankhurst's orders, so that they labeled themselves as "militants", carrying a considerable weight of women who for various problems could not make judgments inside or outside their homes.

Therefore, this represented a way to create awareness that this cause was not only for a few women but for all women, regardless of their social class because in reality, if a woman who had been working since she was a child in a factory difficult conditions or one who had been economically stable all her life and at a certain age had a daughter, they were not going to be able to improve their future in any way if they did not change the laws that at time were established for women's behavior.

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