

# SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

# RISE UP, WOMEN!

*BY DIANE ATKINSON*



# **Summary of “Rise Up, Women!” by Diane Atkinson**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

Learn about the British suffragettes who changed the  
future.

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# Introduction

“Why do we even need feminism? I mean, women can vote now and everything.”

This is a common complaint that you hear in the modern age and it typically comes from white men who feel that advancements in equality are somehow trampling on their own rights. It also highlights a troubling perspective: the belief that sexism is no longer prevalent in our society. But when you think about the history of women’s rights, it becomes glaringly obvious that equality isn’t quite as universal as we might think-- and it hasn’t been around for very long. To put this into perspective, let’s start with a question: how long do you think it has been since women gained the right to vote? Would it surprise you to learn that, in the United Kingdom, women were only allowed to vote in 1918? In America, women were not given this right until 1920.

And while it might be easy to think, “But that was a hundred years ago! That’s a really long time!” if you compare this timeline to the timeline of men’s rights, you might find yourself feeling physically ill. Because women have had the right to vote for only a hundred years. But men have cherished voting rights since... always. So, when we think about this timeline-- and the brutal opposition women’s rights activists have encountered-- our society doesn’t seem so progressive after all. And over the course of this summary, we’ll explore the long and violent history of the female fight to vote.



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# Why Are Voting Rights so Important?

If you're not very interested in politics, you might find yourself wondering why voting rights are so important. After all, many people today take voting rights for granted. Some people disregard their voting rights so completely that they never bother to vote at all. But voting is important because it embodies one of the most fundamental human rights: the right to have a say in what happens to you and your country. Because this right is so common for British and American citizens, we often become blind to our own privilege. We forget that some people live in dictatorial states where laws they cannot vote for are passed by politicians they do not want. The officials who govern their countries do not care about the people and their policies are not designed with their constituents' best interest at heart. For the millions of people who live in these environments, voting rights are a cherished dream. They would give anything to have a say in the government of their country and they are often willing to die for the right to vote.

This is the reality for many people who do not have access to voting rights in the modern age. And the same was true for women in the United Kingdom during the twentieth century. But in order to understand why women were so desperate for voting rights, we should delve a little deeper into the reality of voting inequality. Before women gained the right to vote, they were treated as second-class citizens under the law. In the 1800s, women could not own property, pursue a university education, or-- in many cases-- hold a job. In the 1900s, women were not allowed to have a bank account or file for divorce. These inequalities were legislated solely on the basis of gender. And as a result, being a woman in the United Kingdom meant being a person with no rights. This fundamental inequality in the UK's legislative system meant that exclusively male legislators could pass any laws they wanted, laws that would have an infinite number of ill effects on a woman's life, and the female citizens who were governed by these laws had no legal recourse to fight them.

So, while the world advanced in science, technology, and education, gender inequality in the United Kingdom remained firmly in the dark ages, with a

marked and baseless divide between the rights of men and women. Was it any wonder that the women of Britain finally said, “Enough is enough!” Their efforts were led by members of the powerful Pankhurst family and it was Emmeline Pankhurst who galvanized the rebellion. In the next chapter, we’ll go into more detail about the leaders of the suffragette movement and why their efforts were so important.



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# Who was Emmeline Pankhurst?

Emmeline Pankhurst was born Emmeline Goulden in 1858. She was the oldest of ten siblings. Her mother, Sophia Goulden, was an ardent advocate for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Sophia taught Emmeline about the importance of equality at a very early age and this fueled Emmeline's future passion for women's rights. When Emmeline was fourteen, her mother took her to her first women's suffrage meeting, prompting Emmeline to later write that she had left the event "a conscious and confirmed suffragist." Interestingly enough, however, despite their doctrine of equality, Sophia and Emmeline's father Robert did not believe that men and women should have equal access to education. So, while her brothers attended university and her parents did everything they could to further their sons' education, Emmeline was told that her education should primarily consist of the information that would equip her to be a wife and mother. When she was fifteen, her parents sent her to École Normale Supérieure, a ladies' finishing school in Paris. This sexist contradiction in her parents' rhetoric left Emmeline angry and confused and it fueled her determination to advocate for true equality.

We don't know much about Emmeline's life after she left school, but we do know that she married Dr. Richard Pankhurst in 1879. Although her husband was twenty-four years older than Emmeline, the two appeared to be very much in love and very well suited for each other. Dr. Pankhurst was considered a radical by many members of the British public because he was a firm believer-- and active campaigner-- for the women's rights movement. He was also a proud supporter of free secular education for all and a member of Britain's liberal party. He supported Emmeline's work for the suffragette movement until his dying breath in 1898.

In the decade that followed their marriage, Emmeline gave birth to five children: daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, and sons Frank (who died in childhood) and Harry. But her duties as a wife and mother didn't slow her down! In addition to her domestic responsibilities, Emmeline was an avid



campaigner for women's rights. She also practiced what she preached at home by teaching all of her children to support gender equality. And by the time she started the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903, her daughters were among the union's first members. Emmeline founded the WSPU to be an organization that supported voting rights for all women. This set her apart from some of her fellow activists because, at the time, many women's rights groups only supported voting rights for married women or widows. But Emmeline was passionate about including all women regardless of their marital status.

She also wanted the WSPU to stand out by virtue of the change it accomplished. Other women's rights groups campaigned by writing letters and meeting with parliament, but Emmeline's experience had shown her that asking politely wasn't going to make a difference. Previous demands for parliament and the Liberal Party to support women's suffrage had literally resulted in men laughing in their faces. So, Emmeline decided to force change by creating an organization whose slogan was "Deeds, not words." And so the WSPU's first act of protest was to interrupt a Liberal Party rally by storming through the crowd and waving a banner that read, "Will you give votes for women?" As Emmeline had predicted, this stunt resulted in a confrontation with the police. When the activists refused to stand down, they were arrested. And Emmeline's daughter Christabel deliberately escalated the situation by spitting in the face of the arresting officer.

She knew this action would lead to her incarceration and Christabel, inspired by her mother's dedication, wanted to be a martyr for the cause. Her quick-thinking flash of rebellion ensured that she was one of the first suffragettes who would be imprisoned for protesting inequality. Emmeline later described the WSPU's early efforts by writing that, "We were called militant, and we were quite willing to accept the name. We were determined to press this question of the enfranchisement of women to the point where we were no longer to be ignored by the politicians."



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# The Suffragettes' Stand

The WSPU was not without its supporters; by 1910, bills in favor of female voting rights were being presented to parliament. But when the bills were continually shot down-- first in 1910 and then again in 1911-- Emmeline realized that none of their present efforts were sufficient. Asking nicely wouldn't work, petitioning parliament wouldn't work, and even protesting wouldn't work. Emmeline took this as a sign that their efforts needed to intensify yet again. She was right. As historic periods of inequality have shown time and time again, rights are never gained without an impassioned fight. However, this fact illustrates a very painful truth: when people riot in the streets to demand justice, their oppressors complain that they are being too violent and rebellious. They always seem to miss the fact that most people tried asking politely for change in the first place and were repeatedly ignored. Rebellions only occur after decades of oppression, when people learn that their more palatable efforts are constantly brushed aside.

And the same was true for the suffragette movement. By 1913, the Women's Social and Political Union had become a band of violent protests, intent on destroying everything in their way until they made people listen. They targeted over 270 buildings, smashing their windows with bricks wrapped in petitions. They attacked the British Museum, the Home Office, and the National Gallery in London. And as the protests increased, so did the arrests and the violence against the suffragettes. When activists were arrested, they discovered that gender inequality was rampant in the prison system as well. They found that male prisoners had a relatively comfortable existence when compared to their female counterparts and thus the suffragettes acquired a new cause. And when their voices were ignored yet again, they protested prison inequality by going on a hunger strike.

Their commitment to these strikes astonished their jailors and then infuriated them. When they realized that their captives were willing to starve themselves until they literally died for the cause, the prison guards retaliated by force-feeding their hapless inmates. Professor June Pervis, a gender

studies scholar at the University of Portsmouth, has dedicated herself to documenting the suffragettes' battle and she has written a biography of Emmeline Pankhurst. This biography contains extensive research and direct quotations pulled from original newspaper articles and diaries of the suffragettes. In a chapter entitled "Force-feeding: an abuse of women's bodies," Pervis includes this quote which captures the words of Mary Richardson, an activist who was force-fed during her own hunger strike in prison.

Richardson wrote that: "They fed me five weeks by the nose and at the end of that time my nose what they called 'bit' the tube, and it would not pass into the throat even though they bent it and twisted it into all kinds of shapes. Instead, it went up to the top of my nose and seemed to pierce my eyes... Then they forced my mouth open by inserting their fingers and cutting my gums... and the lining of my cheeks... when I was blind and mad with pain they drove in two large gags. Then the tubes followed and they pressed my tongue down with their fingers and pinched my nose to weaken the natural, and also the purposeful, resistance of my throat."

Richardson's story is only one of many examples of the brutalization suffragettes experienced. But these horrors didn't stop them. Every time the suffragettes were released from prison for health-related reasons-- generally because they were so thin, they were near death-- they went right back to work. Even when they knew they would be arrested again almost immediately, they kept fighting. Sadly, however, their determination did not sway those who were committed to preserving inequality. In the end, it was the war in Europe that helped them achieve their goal. When World War I broke out in 1914, no one had time or mental energy to continue being angry at the suffragettes. The war had a devastating impact on the lives of people all across Europe and everyone was consumed with the horror of wartime life.

But World War I also had an unanticipated impact on the fight for gender equality in England. Because all the men were off fighting, women now had the opportunity to enter traditionally male professions and fill the many gaps

which were left by the absence of an almost exclusively male workforce. Women began to find employment in the transportation industry by driving ambulances, trains, and trucks. They worked on farms, in shipyards, and in cemeteries as gravediggers. They tested ammunition and worked in factories. In fact, it wasn't long before women dominated these industries. Equal pay was a long way off, but their presence in previously male-dominated industries was a harbinger of change. And when so many women held jobs and owned property, the British government was eventually forced to concede that women deserve the right to vote.

In 1918, the British government took the first step toward giving women equal voting rights by passing the Representation of the People Act. This law enabled women over the age of 30 to vote provided that they owned or rented property that was valued at more than \$5/per year. Women over 30 who had graduated from a British university were also allowed to vote even if they did not own property. Although this law fell short of legislating real equality, it was a step in the right direction and the suffragettes were very proud. Ten years later, in 1928, all voting restrictions would be removed and every single woman over the age of 21 had the right to vote. Tragically, this law was passed in July of 1928-- only one month after Emmeline Pankhurst's death in June.



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## Final Summary

Today, people across England and America are proud of their right to vote. Every person over the age of 18 can vote, regardless of their race, gender, education, or status. And although it's easy to take our voting rights for granted, it's important to remember that, historically, voting rights have never been equal. And for women in the United Kingdom, the fight for voting rights was a long, arduous, and traumatic battle. Although many of the great suffragettes like Emmeline Pankhurst did not live to see the realization of their dreams, they were able to rest in peace knowing that their efforts awakened the spirits of women everywhere and paved the way for voting equality for generations to come.



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