

# Suffragette Movement in Britain: Facts & Timeline

## The Women's Suffrage Movement in Great Britain

**Suffrage** refers to the right to vote, and typically the term is used to refer to women's voting rights.

The **Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act**, or the Equal Suffrage Act, was passed by Parliament in 1928. It granted women voting equality with men, providing voting rights to all British women over the age of 21, regardless of whether or not they owned property.

## The Early Suffrage Movement

Interest in women's suffrage in Great Britain began to attract attention around the 1830s and 1840s. There is historical evidence to show that on occasion some wealthy, privileged women were already voting in local elections. Of course, this was not the norm and was on a local basis; there was no national right for women to vote at this time.

By the 1860s suffragist societies were popping up all over the place, and politicians were starting to address the issue. Influential writer, social critic, and member of Parliament **John Stuart Mill** emerged as a vocal champion for women's suffrage. Suffragist societies influenced politicians, gave lectures to raise awareness, and produced many posters and pamphlets advancing their cause.

## Towards a National Movement and Radicalization

By the 1870s, women's suffrage was becoming a national movement in Great Britain. The National Society for Women's Suffrage (NSWS) formed in 1868 represented a unified, national front. The approaches used during this time were largely constitutional, meaning the groups tried to reform the law through legal means. Women who adopted this approach were commonly called "suffragists", whereas women who used violence or civil disobedience as an approach became known as "suffragettes". Today, the two terms are often mistakenly used interchangeably.

After a women's suffrage bill was rejected by Parliament in 1903, many suffragists became increasingly radical and willing to use violence to accomplish their goals. Window-smashing, burning churches, and other acts of vandalism became a common tactic among some suffragettes. Upon arrest and imprisonment, many suffragettes went on hunger strikes, resulting in them having to be violently force-fed in jail. Because of this, suffragettes were gaining sympathy in the press and among the public. And of course, this was part of their strategy. To thwart sympathy toward the suffrage movement, Parliament passed the "**Cat and Mouse Act**", or the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act of 1913. This act allowed women to be temporarily released from prison if their health was adversely affected by hunger strikes or illness.