



# THE EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

## 31. Women's emancipation and feminism

### *Suffragette* Movie Sparks New Claims of Sexism



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*Suffragette* (2015) is a thrilling movie about the fight for equality in early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. It pivots on Maud, a working wife and mother who becomes an activist for the suffragette cause together with women from all walks of life. Inspired by true events and true heroines like Emily Pankhurst, *Suffragette* explores the daily challenges of those who risked all they had for women's right to vote. Carey Mulligan, Helena Bonham Carter and Meryl Streep lead the cast.

For the first time, the story of the suffragettes is told in a feature length film with an all-star cast. It has reignited a century-old debate: direct action, or the art of persuasion? 'Oh golly,' said actor Helena Bonham-Carter as protesters swarmed the red carpet of her latest film premiere. But she went on signing posters and posing for photos  
5 undeterred. 'I'm glad our film has done something', she said later. 'That's exactly what it's there for.'

The activists were protesting against cuts to services to help female victims of domestic violence. Before being removed by security, they lay on the ground chanting 'dead women can't vote'. They were fighting, they said, in the spirit of the women the film  
10 focused on: the suffragettes.

It has been over a century since feminists in Britain first united to campaign for the right to vote. They were led by the indomitable Pankhurst family, who founded the movement's militant arm, the WSPU. The women drew attention to their cause by chaining themselves to railings of government buildings; setting fire to post boxes;  
15 defacing portraits in the National Gallery; and even planting bombs in Westminster Abbey. In 1913, Emily Davison was killed while trying to attach a WSPU banner to the king's horse during the Epsom Derby.

The methods were controversial. They certainly brought more attention to the cause than the non-violent factions had ever achieved, and for those on hunger strike in  
20 prison, the horrors of forced feeding elicited sympathy. But others felt they had gone



too far – this was no way, said some, to convince men that women were rational enough to be trusted with a vote.

The First World War put a stop to the campaign, and women across the country began taking on jobs previously done by men. When the war ended, women over 30 were  
25 finally granted the vote.

For decades, the story has barely been represented on film, but the makers of *Suffragette* say they are glad to right that injustice.

‘It’s a film to mark the achievement of what these women did and what they gave to us’, said the film’s main actor, Carey Mulligan. ‘But it also highlights where we are in the  
30 world. We still live in a society that’s sexist.’

### Deeds Not Words

There is no longer a need for militant action, say some. Yes, women still face inequality, but legally they have been equal to men for some time. Angry voices and a disruptive attitude only put people off a serious issue. The time has come for a calmer, more  
35 collaborative approach to politics, which includes everyone in a rational debate.

But others disagree. Women have been asking for equal treatment for well over 100 years. But still they are paid less than men, they continue to disproportionately suffer violence at the hands of men. Loud protest and extreme demonstrations force people to stop ignoring the issue. It is the only way to affect real change.

(From theday.co.uk)

## Marilyn French

### *The Women's Room* (1977)

Mira  115

*The scene is set in the 1950s. Samantha, Mira's friend, has a money problem. Mira has offered to help her.*

'Absolutely not,' Norm said.

'Norm, poor Samantha!'

'I feel very very sorry for Samantha,' he said solemnly, 'but I'll be goddamned if I'm going to lay out my hard-earned money to help that creep<sup>1</sup> Simp.'

5 'You wouldn't be helping Simp. He doesn't even live there now.'

'He owns the house, doesn't he? It would be different if I thought he'd ever repay it, but from what you say, he's a loser and a stupid bastard, and I'd never see that money again.'

'Oh, Norm, what difference does it make? We have plenty.'

'That's easy for you to say. That money comes out of my hide.'

10 'What do you think I do all day? What have I done all these years? I work as hard as you do.'

'Oh, stop saying that!'

'What do you mean, come off it?' Her voice rose wildly. 'Am I not an equal participant in this marriage? Don't I contribute to it?'

15 'Of course you do,' he said placatingly, but there was an edge of disgust in his voice, 'but you contribute different things. You don't contribute money.'

'My work enables you to make that money!'

'Oh, Mira, don't be ridiculous. Do you think I need you to do my work? I could live anywhere, I could have a housekeeper, or live in a hotel. I support your way of life by my work, not the reverse.'

20

'And I have nothing to say about how it's spent?'

'Of course you do. Don't I give you everything you want?'

'I don't know. I never seem to want anything.'

'Do I complain about your bills for clothes, or the kids' music lessons or camp?'

25 'I want this, then. I want three hundred dollars for Samantha.'

'No, Mira. And that's the end of it.' He stood up and left the room, and in a few minutes, she heard the shower running. He was going out to a meeting that evening. She stood up too, and only then did she realize her whole body was shaking. She held on to the back of the kitchen chair. She wanted to pick it up, she wanted to race

30 upstairs with it and smash open the bathroom door and crash it down on his head.

## Ian McEwan

### *Sweet Tooth* (2012)

Serena  116

The plot of *Sweet Tooth* is set in early-1970s England. The protagonist is Serena Frome, the daughter of an Anglican bishop, who has a great talent for mathematics and is admitted to the University of Cambridge.

But what I hadn't understood about my mother was that buried deep beneath this conventional exterior was the hardy little seed of a feminist. I'm sure that word never passed her lips, but it made no difference. Her certainty frightened me. She said it was my duty as a woman to go to Cambridge to study maths. As a  
 5 woman? In those days, in our milieu, no one ever spoke like that. No woman did anything 'as a woman'. She told me she would not permit me to waste my talent. I was to excel and become extraordinary. I must have a proper career in science or engineering or economics. She allowed herself the world-oyster cliché<sup>1</sup>. It was unfair on my sister that I was both clever and beautiful when she was neither. It  
 10 would compound the injustice if I failed to aim high. I didn't follow the logic of this, but I said nothing. My mother told me she would never forgive me and she would never forgive herself if I went off to read<sup>2</sup> English and became no more than a slightly better educated housewife than she was. I was in danger of *wasting my life*. Those were her words, and they represented an admission. This was the  
 15 only time she expressed or implied dissatisfaction with her lot<sup>3</sup>. Then she enlisted my father – 'the Bishop' was what my sister and I called him. When I came in from school one afternoon my mother told me he was waiting for me in his study. In my green blazer with its heraldic crest and emblazoned motto – *Nisi Dominus Vanum* (Without the Lord All is in Vain) – I sulkily lolled in his  
 20 clubbish leather armchair while he presided at his desk, shuffling papers, humming to himself as he ordered his thoughts. [...] He had made some enquiries. Cambridge was anxious to be seen to be 'opening its gates to the modern egalitarian world'. With my burden of triple misfortune – a grammar-school<sup>4</sup>, a girl, an all-male subject – I was certain to get in.

1. **world-oyster cliché:** when 'the world is your oyster', you have everything to succeed in life
2. **read:** study (at university)
3. **her lot:** her own life

4. **grammar-school:** traditional British school where uniforms are required and pupils generally go on to study at prestigious universities

## Women and work

### We Did It 117

The article from The Economist deals with American women in the workforce and what measures can be taken to support them.

#### THE RICH WORLD'S QUIET REVOLUTION: WOMEN ARE GRADUALLY TAKING OVER THE WORKPLACE

At a time when the world is short of causes for celebration, here is a candidate: within the next few months women will cross the 50% threshold and become the majority of the American workforce.

5 Women already make up the majority of university graduates in the OECD countries and the majority of professional workers in several rich countries, including the United States. Women run many of the world's great companies, from PepsiCo in America to Areva in France.

Women's economic empowerment is arguably the biggest social change of our times. Just a generation ago, women were largely confined to repetitive, menial jobs. They were routinely

10 subjected to casual sexism and were expected to abandon their careers when they married and had children. Today they are running some of the organisations that once treated them as second-class citizens. Millions of women have been given more control over their own lives. And millions of brains have been put to more productive use. Societies that try to resist this trend – most notably the Arab countries, but also Japan and some southern European countries – will pay a heavy price in the

15 form of wasted talent and frustrated citizens.

This revolution has been achieved with only a modicum of friction. Men have, by and large, welcomed women's invasion of the workplace. Yet even the most positive changes can be incomplete or unsatisfactory. This particular advance comes with two stings. The first is that women are still under-represented at the top of companies. Only 2% of the bosses of America's largest companies

20 and 5% of their peers in Britain are women. They are also paid significantly less than men on average. The second is that juggling work and child-rearing is difficult. Middle-class couples routinely complain that they have too little time for their children. But the biggest losers are poor children – particularly in places like America and Britain that have combined high levels of female participation in the labour force with a reluctance to spend public money on child care.

#### 25 DEALING WITH THE JUGGLE<sup>1</sup>

These two problems are closely related. Many women feel they have to choose between their children and their careers. Women who prosper in high-pressure companies during their 20s drop out in dramatic numbers in their 30s and then find it almost impossible to regain their earlier momentum. Less-skilled women are trapped in poorly paid jobs with hand-to-mouth<sup>2</sup> child-care arrangements.

30 Motherhood, not sexism, is the issue: in America, childless women earn almost as much as men, but mothers earn significantly less. And those mothers' relative poverty also disadvantages their children. Demand for female brains is helping to alleviate some of these problems. Even if some of the new

1. **dealing with the juggle:** *it. riuscire a barcamenarsi*

2. **hand-to-mouth:** bare minimum



35 theories about warm-hearted women making inherently superior workers are bunk, several trends favour the more educated sex, including the 'war for talent' and the growing flexibility of the workplace. Law firms, consultancies and banks are rethinking their 'up or out' promotion systems because they are losing so many able women. More than 90% of companies in Germany and Sweden allow flexible working. And new technology is making it easier to redesign work in all sorts of family-friendly ways.

40 Women have certainly performed better over the past decade than men. In the European Union women have filled 6m of the 8m new jobs created since 2000. In America three out of four people thrown out of work since the 'mancession' began have been male. And the shift towards women is likely to continue: by 2011 there will be 2.6m more female than male university students in America.

### THE LIGHT HAND OF THE STATE

45 All this argues, mostly, for letting the market do the work. That has not stopped calls for hefty state intervention of the Scandinavian sort. Norway has used threats of quotas to dramatic effect. Some 40% of the legislators there are women. All the Scandinavian countries provide plenty of state-financed nurseries. They have the highest levels of female employment in the world and far fewer of the social problems that plague Britain and America. Surely, comes the argument, there is a way to speed up the revolution – and improve the tough lives of many

50 working women and their children?

If that means massive intervention, in the shape of affirmative-action programmes and across-the-board benefits for parents of all sorts, the answer is no. To begin with, promoting people on the basis of their sex is illiberal and unfair, and stigmatises its beneficiaries. And there are practical problems. Lengthy periods of paid maternity leave can put firms off hiring women,

55 which helps explain why most Swedish women work in the public sector and Sweden has a lower proportion of women in management than America does.

But there are plenty of cheaper, subtler ways in which governments can make life easier for women. Welfare states were designed when most women stayed at home. They need to change the way they operate. German schools, for instance, close at midday. American schools shut

60 down for two months in the summer. These things can be changed without huge cost. Some popular American charter schools now offer longer school days and shorter summer holidays. And, without going to Scandinavian lengths, America could invest more in its children: it spends a lower share of its GDP on public child-care than almost any other rich country, and is the only rich country that refuses to provide mothers with paid maternity leave. Barack Obama

65 needs to measure up to his campaign rhetoric about 'real family values'.

Still, these nagging problems should not overshadow the dramatic progress that women have made in recent decades. During the second world war, when America's menfolk were off at the front, the government had to summon up the image of Rosie the Riveter, with her flexed muscle and 'We Can Do It' slogan, to encourage women into the workforce. Today women are

70 marching into the workplace in ever larger numbers and taking a sledgehammer to the remaining glass ceilings.

(From [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com))