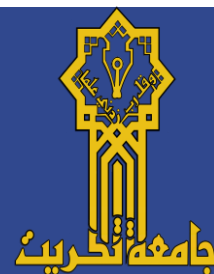


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## Women Rights in Britain and Demands for Equality – A Critical Study with Reference to the Movie “Suffragette”

[\*] **Asst. Lecturer. Iman Abdul-Quddous Abdul-Rahman**

*Department of Accounting, Madenat Alelem University College  
 Baghdad, Iraq*

[1] **Asst. Prof. Dr. Ayad Enad Khalaf**

*Department of Religious Education and Islamic Studies, Sunni Endowment  
 Diwan  
 Baghdad, Iraq*

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of equality between men and women has a long history back to thousands of years. Women have rights and duties that differ from men according to the sexual differences between them which have made man hold responsibilities vary from women. From ancient times to the present time, women still struggle to get their right regarding different issues in life. This paper deals with analysing the film ‘suffragette’ which portrays women’s suffrage to get their right to equal pay and to vote. The purpose of this study is to depict human sufferings in a diverse and detailed manner, especially, for women. For this purpose, this paper is designed to consist of an introduction and four sections. In the first section, the writer gives the definitions of some important terms related to the present study. The second section introduces the literature background regarding women’s rights in ancient Rome and Greece, then in the time of Christianity, and finally in Britain in 19th century in which, it is related very much to the analysis of the movie ‘suffragette’. Section three includes a summary of the movie ‘suffragette’. Section four has the task of analysing the data and portraying the place of women between gender equality and social history and women’s rights as a human demand. The analysis of the film depicts how women of Britain struggle to get their rights in life and bring welfare for all the community although being neglected by history.

### KEYWORDS

Women Rights, Feminism, Films Analysis, Suffrage, Gender Equality



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## Introduction:

The issue of fairness and equality between men and women has a long history going back to thousands of years. This issue raises problems as a result of the misunderstanding and mixing between the two terms 'equity' and 'equality'. Women have rights and duties that differ from men; however, this difference should not involve a value judgment, but rather a social structure that allows both to interact as equals (Fraser & Honneth, 2007). Thus, equality between men and women is possible in some issues but it is impossible in others as a result of the sexual differences between men and women which make men hold responsibilities differing from women. For example, the containment of emotions often demanded by the male gender may lead to an inability to identify, describe, and feel certain emotions, such as fear, empathy, and tenderness (Volpato, 2013). Thus, what women actually need is the equity from the part of men. The unfair treatment to women makes them suffer disproportionately, leading to what sociologists refer to as the "feminization of poverty," where two out of every three poor adults are women. Thus, there is an inverse relationship between poverty and inequality, and as Duflo (2012) said, gender equality improves when poverty decreases (Duflo, 2012). Transnationally, women encounter recurring social issues such as poverty, violence, reproductive concerns, lack of education, sex work, and susceptibility to disease (*Rights of Women*, 1998).

The depiction of the female figure in the reality of life certainly forms a representation, especially when it comes to social life that occurs in society. Many people think that women should not act similarly to men. Even the existence of women in society still puts forward a patriarchal culture in life. So, it is not a surprise if there is a discussion concerning women related to the issue of feminism (Juliano, 2015). Looking at the current condition, it can be said that the root of the problem is based on discrimination against women. Women are indeed more susceptible to oppression and injustice, especially amid high gender imbalances that can occur anywhere. A culture that sees women as objects can close the inner eyes of the perpetrators of violence (JatiKusuma, 2019). The movie is a documentary film that discusses the unfair treatment towards women in society. This film delivers a message to the whole women to struggle for the sake of their rights to get the welfare of life properly and to fight for justice.

Many movies were made over the last century attempting to depict the oppression and injustice treatment of women in many societies. Movies are different from articles or books, even if they depict the same incident. This article focuses on movie analysis as movies tell multiple stories about the pattern of human experience and speak a different language, often making the viewer think in different ways (Frank, 2000). The selected movie in this study focuses not only on the role of women in society and their struggle to get their rights but also on the role of women in their everyday life with children and domestic duties at home. Focusing on the domestic duties of women enhances social history in which women play an important role that leads to forming a real women's history.

Studying movies is an essential issue in exploring the labour movement orally as well as historically because movies, as Brigden (2016) shows, have helped save the oral history of lived experiences of the labour movement, in which the voice, colour, and motion help revive and validate the collective memory, every time the movie is viewed (Brigden, 2016). Moreover, movies depict the social conflicts of the past and, as Snyder (1995) argues, have a significant historical role as a control system in social conflicts (Snyder, 1995). Another important mission that movies can do, as Puette (1992) shows, is the persuasion of the audience for the target issue which is adopted by these kinds of movies which become effective, powerful, and convincing when it has the least bias and the deepest reach and thus have a profound impact on society (Puette, 1992).

Through the analysis of the movie, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What is the importance of this type of movies in enhancing the social history of women?

- (2) "How do the directors portray the issue of women's struggle through the setting of the movie?
- (3) Does the support of women from men' side in getting their right leads to the benefit of the two sides?
- (4) How should society make a balance between establishing equity and granting rights for women?

This exploratory study aims to analyse the selected movie that has served as social evidence regarding the struggle of women for the sake of their right in equal wages and vote in elections.

### **Definition of Important Terms in The Study:**

#### **Women's Rights:**

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Women's Rights as 'legal, political, and social rights for women equal to those of men. In other words, woman's rights refer to the full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on the grounds of sex, are priority objectives of the global community.

#### **Feminism:**

Feminism (Feminist / Femina) comes from Latin which means woman. In feminist theories, the focus is on the fundamental problems concerning women with the main issue of gender justice. It means that feminism is an understanding or theory of gender justice. Meanwhile, what meant by feminists is that people realize that women have been treated unfairly and try to change this situation (Bryson, 2019).

Feminism is one of the oldest movements in global history. It is an organized activity in support of women's rights and interests. There's no single definition, but feminism boils down to ending gender discrimination and bringing about gender equality. Feminism, as Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) explains, looks completely different as she claims that the feminist movement may have started out with strong anti-male sentiment, but that was in reaction to men controlling nearly every aspect of women's lives. But contemporary feminism has evolved to move away from that short-sighted attitude into something broader: "The threat, the enemy, is sexist thought and behaviour," (Hooks 2000).

#### **Gender and Sex:**

To understand the meaning of the term gender, it is necessary to differentiate it from the term sex. Sex refers to a set of biological attributes in humans and animals (Coen 2012). It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features and thus it is usually categorized as female or male. Gender, on the other hand, is the preferred word when referring to behavioral, cultural, and psychological traits typically associated with sex. Thus, gender is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman, 1987) – something we perform (Butler, 1990).

Thus, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender-diverse people. According to Nussbaum (2001), discrimination based on race, religion, gender, nationality, caste, or ethnicity is considered a failure of the ability to associate. For her, freedom is not only a matter of possessing fundamental rights but also requires the conditions to exercise them. In other words, gender influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society.

After explaining the differences between sex and gender, the next section and the following ones are to introduce a historical follow-up for the place of women in the community from the ancient times to the present time.

### **Women's Rights in Ancient Rome and Greece:**

Although women in Rome experienced more freedoms than, for example, women in ancient Athens, women living in Republican Rome (ca. 509 BCE to 30 BCE) lived in a patriarchal society that strictly controlled and restricted their movements and opportunities (Paoli, 1963:113)

Reading the history of events in the social life of women in Rome demonstrates that it was dangerous to be a woman in Rome for many reasons. Some of these reasons are; the prevalence of laws that allowed the beating or execution of women for minor offenses, the power that manus marriages gave to husbands over their wives, and the atmosphere created by the numerous historical tales about rape and murder of women.

To assure this fact, the literature of that time in general, and fiction as a special case, can act as mirrors that reflect social attitudes, assumptions, and realities. The ancient artefacts and written stories such as Rhea Silvia, Sabine women, Tarpeia, Lucretia, Horatia, Verginia illustrate how violence against women in ancient Rome was pervasive in many forms, including politically-motivated violence, domestic violence, and sexual violence.

All these events in the literature of Rome were manifestations which assure how women in Ancient Rome did not get equal legal status with men. By law, Roman girls and women were almost always under the jurisdiction of a male, whether a paterfamilias, a husband, or a legally appointed guardian. Throughout her life, a woman might pass from the control of one male to another—most typically, from father to husband (McClure, 2002:160). Ancient Rome was a macho society, often misogynistic, where women did not enjoy equal citizen rights.

Similarly, in Ancient Greece many pieces of evidences — which range from historiography and biography to mythological sources and the novel — together were manifestations of a wider behavioural pattern of violence against women in ancient Greece, including fiction, myth, and history. Many recent studies such as Wilson et al. (1993), Camilleri and Quinsey (2012), Buss (2005), McHardy (2008), and Polk (1994) approved violence against women in ancient Greece.

The ancient Greek society was a man-centered society, in many aspects of societal and family life (McKeown, 2018). The presence of women in Greek myths is more significant than their position in the ancient Greek society, where they obviously had limited roles.

It is obvious that women could not attend public assemblies, vote, or hold public office, and even a woman's name was not to be mentioned in public. It can be seen that writers as Aristotle have no doubts that women were intellectually incapable of making important decisions for themselves (McKeown, 2018). From today's point of view, it represented clear established gender discrimination. Thus, the general status and position of women were not equal in all city-states of ancient Greece.

### **Women in Christianity:**

Christianity had an important role in changing the way that the community dealt with women. Women became among Jesus' earliest followers. Many women accompanied Jesus during his ministry and supported him out of their private means (Luke 8:1-3). He spoke to women both in public and private, and indeed he learned from them. After the death of Jesus, women continued to play prominent roles in the early movement. Some scholars have even suggested that the majority of Christians in the first century may have been women.

In the First Century of Christianity, the letters of ST Paul - dated to the middle of the first century CE provide vivid clues about the kind of activities in which women engaged more generally. Women held offices and played significant roles in group worship. Here is clear evidence of women apostles active in the earliest work of spreading the Christian message.

One of the important early figures in the church was Phoebe, to whom Paul referred in Romans as "a deacon of the church." As a leader of the early church, Paul supported Phoebe and other. (McNeel, 2018). Christian women with their involvement in the church, and also asserted that in Christ "there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ." Galatian 3:28 (NAS).

Reading the letters of St Paul attitude towards women may give clues to two views and both views have been proved concerning his letters. One shows that he was a countercultural and asked for equality with men, and another as he was conformed to the patriarchal structures of his day, endorsing the subordination of women to men. For example, St Paul's countercultural approach has been supported by appeal to passages such as Gal 3. 28:

*'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.*

Other passages such as (I Corinthians 14. 34–35) look contradict this affirmatory position, with its clear directive that):

*('Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church').*

*"Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent."* (1 Tim. 2:11–12).

Does this indicate paradoxical differences in the way that women are understood in different parts of St Paul's letters? To explain this argument, it can be said that this voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. So, it is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife's equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25) and to serve as the leader in a relationship of two equals.

### **Women in Britain in 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Feminism**

The appearance of many movements that call for demanding equal pay, law reform, the vote for women, etc assures clearly that women in Britain got neither equity nor equality with men. Most working-class women in England in 19<sup>th</sup> Century had no choice but to work in order to help support their families. They worked either in factories or in domestic service for richer households or in family businesses. Many women also carried out home-based work such as finishing garments and shoes for factories, laundry, or preparing snacks to sell in the market or streets. All this work was in addition to their unpaid work at home.

However, women's work was not the main problem but it was the amount of the wages they were getting. Often women's wages were thought of as secondary earnings and less important than men's wages even though they were crucial to the family's survival. Many women were employed in small industries like shirt making, nail making, chain making, and shoe stitching, and throughout most of this period, women were paid less than their male counterparts working alongside them, which created great financial difficulties for working women.

From the 1850s onwards, trade unions began to be established, first among better-paid workers and they then expanded to represent a wider range of workers. However, women remained for the most part excluded from trade unions, and unequal pay was the norm.

In 1888 Clementina Black, one of the only two women delegates at the Women's Trades Union Council, proposed the first TUC equal pay resolution. This demand was made not on the basis of women's right to equal pay, but on the basis that their lower pay disadvantaged men in the labour market. The resolution stated that where women were "employed merely because they were cheaper, all work gradually fell into their hands, ... and that this resulted in lower (wages) to the general injury of men and women alike." But it took many decades for this demand to be supported by the wider union movement.

The majority of upper and most middle-class women did not undertake paid work except for 'respectable' activities like being a governess, a music teacher or even a nurse. Most women of this class were expected just to get married and look after their children and home. Professional jobs like lawyers, vets, and civil servants remained closed to women through much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the most famous strikes by women workers during the nineteenth century took place during the exceptionally cold July of 1888 at Byrant and May Match factory in the East End of London. The strike began when 200 workers left work in protest when the factory owners sacked three workers who had spoken to a social reformer about their working conditions. The struggle of women to get their rights for equality with men continues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also. The following movie analysis will show clearly the effect of the bad treatment towards women in Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Summary of 'Suffragette' Movie:

*Suffragette* is a 2015 British historical drama film of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom, directed by Sarah Gavron and written by Abi Morgan. It is set in London in the late 19th and early 20th century. This film focuses on a turning point in the Suffragette campaign for the vote for women, from peaceful protest to aggressive demonstrations. The film manages to convey some important points about the legal and social position of women, and wives, during this period such as; sexual exploitation, and the prevalence of 'victim-blaming' in cases of such abuse, domestic violence; the lack of equality with men in terms of wages, and the husband's exclusionary authority about children.

*Suffragette* is a moving drama exploring the passion and heartbreak of the main character Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan) and those who risked all they had for women's right to vote – their jobs, their homes, their children, and even their lives, based on the message: "It is deeds not words that will get us the vote." As this movie is about political movements, it tends to view the events through the filter of one individual's experience, narrowing the scope.

### Data Analysis:

The movie includes two voices; one is the voice of worker women who struggle for their rights in equal pay as well as other rights in life, and the voice of the men who govern the factories and other institutions in Britain and look at women as a minor thing in life. Within the context of the movie, each text and sentence has a referential aim and reflexes the events of the life of women at that time. As an image of how women were living, the following scene by the tongue of Maud gives a clear image of women's real situation:

**Maud Watts:** *All my life I've done what men told me. Well, I can't have that anymore.*

Maud reflects on her perseverance in the movement talking about how she's served men her whole life, and now she has to shine again as well as every other woman around. Women use all the means to get their rights. At the same time of her suffering, Maud had aspirations and hopes of success. In one of the scenes, Maud explores that the unfair treatment to women push them to use all the means to get their rights, but they found that to strike peacefully is not enough and they need to force men to listen to them, as she states:

*"We break windows, we burn things because war's the only language men listen to. Cause you've beaten us and betrayed us and there's nothing else left".*

The insistence and the great will for women to get their right in vote is expressed clearly in another scene through the dialogue of Maud Watts with the inspector:

**Inspector Arthur Steed:** *There's nothing left but to stop you.*

**Maud Watts:** *What are you gonna do? Lock us all up? We're in every home, we're half the human race, you can't stop us all.*

**Inspector Arthur Steed:** *You might lose your life before this is over.*

**Maud Watts:** *We will win.*

Steed tries his best to intimidate Maud into giving up her cause but she isn't budging. She knows that their movement is only growing and it's reaching a point where the men can no longer ignore their demands. This movie also depicts the means that women use for getting their rights



through 'deeds not words' such as defying the rules of the government, not only by making strikes in the streets of London, as in:

**Maud Watts:** *You a suffragette, Mrs. Ellyn?*

**Edith Ellyn:** *I consider myself more of a soldier. As Miss Pankhursts says, it's deeds, not words, that will get us the vote.*

When Maud meets with Edith, a seasoned activist in the movement, Edith encourages Maud to take action for their cause, rather than sitting back talking about it. It's solid advice that pays off!

**Emmeline Pankhurst:** *For 50 years, we have laboured peacefully to secure the vote for women. We've been ridiculed, battered and ignored. Fight to secure the vote for women. Defy this government.*

Speaking to the women outside her building, Emmeline, the original feminist activist, empowers those in the movement to persevere. She also encouraged the women not to give up fighting. As in:

**Emmeline Pankhurst:** *Never surrender. Never give up the fight.*

In speaking to her troops, Emmeline urges them to fight for their cause. Persistence will win this battle, she assures them. This movie also explains why women choose to adopt non-peaceful demonstrations to assure the idea that war is the only language of dialogue that men know, as in:

**Maud Watts:** *We break windows. We burn things, cause war's the only language men listen to.*

On the other side, the movie depicts from the voice of Steed how men look at women as weak and cannot stand long, as in:

**Steed:** *We've identified weaknesses in their ranks. We're hoping one of them will break.*

Steed strategizes on how he and his team can split up the movement before it spreads. They want to find the weak links and then exploit them. And from the voice of Benedict, the men who work against the women go to great lengths to stop the movement by any means as in:

**Benedict:** *Punish those responsible, whatever way you can.*

In this case, they remove small children from their mothers in an attempt to coerce them to give up their demands.

The movie is also a type of investigation about the importance of women's role in their history. It focuses on the domestic role of women in everyday life as a kind of women's social history. Social history, as Scott states, offered important support for women's history for many reasons. First, it provided methodologies and quantification, in the use of details from everyday life, and in interdisciplinary borrowings from sociology, demography, and ethnography. Second, it is conceptualised as a historical phenomena of family relationship, fertility, and sexuality. Third, social history challenged the narrative line of political history by taking ads on its subject to large-scale processes as they were realised in many dimensions of human experience. (Scott,1999:114)

Suffragette is, as a type of women's history, a tart reminder to those who are casual about democratic gender equality that equal pay and votes for women were not something that naturally evolved due to the ruling class's innate decency; they had to be fought for.

The issue of gender equality was placed on the policy agenda by women. The reason is obvious: it is women who are disadvantaged by the main patterns of gender inequality and who therefore have the claim for redress. Moving toward a gender-equal society involves profound institutional change as well as change in everyday life and personal conduct. To move far in this direction requires widespread social support, including significant support from men and boys.

The demands for equal pay for women and their right to vote don't have special benefits for women only. On the contrary, these demands will bring welfare for the community because women are in each house and each family in the community. For all the above reasons, women's rights have expanded considerably since the nineteenth century, when women were denied access

to higher education and the right to own property and vote. The following table shows the International Women's Suffrage Timeline in the world.

**Table (1) International Women's Suffrage Timeline**

1893 New Zealand	1950 India
1902 Australia	1954 Colombia
1906 Finland	1957 Malaysia, Zimbabwe
1913 Norway	1962 Algeria
1915 Denmark	1963 Iran, Morocco
1917 Canada	1964 Libya
1918 Austria, Germany, Poland, Russia	1967 Ecuador
1919 Netherlands	1971 Switzerland
1920 United States	1972 Bangladesh
1921 Sweden	1974 Jordan
1928 Britain, Ireland	1976 Portugal
1931 Spain	1989 Namibia
1944 France	1990 Western Samoa
1945 Italy	1993 Kazakhstan, Moldova
1947 Argentina, Japan, Mexico, Pakistan	1994 South Africa
1949 China	2005 Kuwait

**Source:** The New York Times, May 22, 2005

### Conclusions:

As mentioned earlier, the findings of this paper are descriptive in nature with little explanatory details. Such a method was adopted since the objective of this study is to understand the diverse depiction of women's rights in equal pay and the vote in movies that can influence the society, especially women, to struggle to get their right to live in dignity and welfare. The findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

1. The issue of fairness and equality between men and women has a long history back to thousands of years because always there is a mixing between the two terms 'fairness' and 'equality'. Although there are sexual differences between men and women which make men responsible for everything in life, women actually need is the equity from the part of men.
2. The unfair treatment to women makes them suffer and encounter recurring social issues such as poverty, violence, reproductive concerns, lack of education, sex work, and susceptibility to diseases.
3. Feminism is an organized activity in support of women's rights and interests to end gender discrimination and bring about gender equality.
4. The voluntary submission of one equal to another, between man and woman, is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. So, it is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife's equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church.
5. The movie is a type of investigation about the importance of women's role in their history, as it focuses on the domestic role of women in everyday life as a kind of women's social history.
6. The demands for equal pay for women and their right to vote don't have special benefits for women only, but also for the men as these demands will bring welfare for all in the community.



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