

Social Reform and Suffrage: Women's Activism in the Nineteenth Century

The Industrial Revolution brought about massive economic, social, and cultural change. For people who owned factories or small businesses or for people who belonged to the professional trades such as law or medicine, the Industrial Revolution brought many benefits. For factory workers, however, the Industrial Revolution came at an extremely high cost with few initial benefits. The hours were long, the pay was low, and the living and work conditions were poor.

Others were also dissatisfied with the world brought about

by the Industrial Revolution. Though certainly living a much more comfortable life than the working class, middle-class women also had few rights in the nineteenth century. In this lesson you will examine some of the ways in which the working class and some middle-class women acted politically without having the vote. Workers organized labor unions and went on strike to fight for better wages and work conditions. Middle-class women joined groups that focused on social reform, health reform, and the fight for **suffrage**.

One of the most important

goals of both groups was winning the right to vote (the franchise). Workers and middle-class women fought hard for expanded suffrage. They knew that the vote would allow them to be heard by public officials, thus giving them the power to begin reshaping society in more equitable ways.

Glossary of Terms

Suffrage: the right or privilege of voting.

Suffragette: refers to members of the women's movement that used militant rather than political means to win the vote for women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Equitable: refers to equal distribution.

Vivisector: a person who operates on a living animal for the purposes of medical or other experimentation.

WORKING CLASS ACTIVISM

- **Women Worker's Songs. Compare the two workers' songs.**

MY FACTORY

At other companies there are
Buddhas and gods.
At mine only demons and
serpents.

When I hear the manager
talking,
His words say only "money,
money, and time."

The demon overseer, the devil
accountant,
The good for nothing chrysalis.

If you look through the factory's
regulations,
You see that not one in a
thousand lies unused.

We must follow the regulations;
We must look at the foreman's
nasty face.

SUNG TO THE AIR OF JENNY JONES

You gentles of England, I pray give attention,
Unto those few lines, I'm going to relate,
Concerning the seamstress, I'm going to mention,
Who long time has been, in a sad wretched state,
Laboriously toiling, both night, noon, and morning,
For a wretched subsistence, now mark what I say.
She's quite unprotected, forlorn, and dejected,
For sixpence, or eightpence, tenpence a day.

Come forward you nobles, and grant them assistance,
Give them employ, and a fair price them pay,
And then you will find, the poor hard working
seamstress,
From honor and virtue will not go astray.

To show them compassion pray quickly be stirring,
In delay, there is danger, there's no time to spare,...
The pride of the world is o'erwhelmed with care,
Old England's considered, for honour and virtue,
And beauty the glory and pride of the world,
Nor be not hesitating, but boldly step forward,
Suppression and tyranny, far away hurl.

Similar Factory Experiences:

1. List three grievances or complaints that you see in both songs.

Different Ways of Talking About Similar Experiences:

2. One of the songs comes from Japan. Which do you think it is?

3. List the words that let you know which song comes from Japan.

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

• Suffragette Images

Examine the images of the Suffragettes, women who fought for the right to vote through public demonstrations and also sometimes using militant means such as the destruction of private property.



Images 1 and 2. Suffragette Marches.

From Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*.

1. Can you tell what class the Suffragettes come from by examining their clothes and hats?
2. Can you tell what time of day it is from the image? Do you see any women who might be working-class? Where are the working-class women?

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

• “Votes for Workers”

Middle-class women activists also saw working-class women as extremely vulnerable. Like the poorly treated Indian woman who needed protection from Indian men, working-class women in Europe also needed protection from the abuse of factory owners and managers. If middle-class women could win the vote, they could then begin to pass laws that would protect Indian and working women in vulnerable positions. Look at the Suffragette poster “Votes for Workers” and answer the following questions.

1. What type of work is the woman doing? How can you tell?
2. Who does this poster suggest is the most vulnerable worker? Why is she vulnerable?
3. What political right do middle-class women reformers need to win to help improve the condition of working-class and Indian women?



Image 3. Suffragette Poster Campaign. Designed by W.F. Winter, printed by Carl Henschel, published by the Artists' Suffrage League. Library of Congress.

POST-ACTIVITY ASSIGNMENT:

Pretend you are a middle-class woman fighting for suffrage. Write a letter to the editor of the Times explaining why you think suffrage (the vote) should be given to middle-class women. Using information that you learned in the unit, explain why women should have the vote and why they deserve it.