

Women's Suffrage Movements Around the World

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Abstract

Comparing and contrasting different countries on each continent, the article explores the history of women's suffrage. Initially, the leading opinion was that women's influence in political life should come through the men in their lives and it must happen behind closed doors. Gradually, we see more countries turning to the idea that women can have direct action in politics and that they can participate in public life in a variety of roles. We present the history of women's suffrage around the world, focusing on women's roles and their relationship to suffrage.

Keywords: *right to vote, history of women's suffrage, women's movements.*

Introduction

The chance to vote and participate in politics is closely aligned with the fundamental values of liberty, equality, and democracy. The association of political participation with these important values has encouraged the extension over the years of the right to vote as well as the effectiveness of political protests. The right of women to vote is a matter of fact today, but at the time when it was proposed it was a revolutionary demand. Women's organizations have worked hard all over the world to gain access to the political system.

This article aims to present the history of women's suffrage around the world. I intend to provide a broad overview of the debates surrounding the topic, focusing on women's roles and their relationship to suffrage. The United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, France, Poland, India, Saudi Arabia, Cameroon, Liberia, Australia and New Zealand are inspiring case studies for the evolution of women's franchise on each continent. They embraced different approaches to voting regulation and thus, constitute an interesting sample for case comparison through the method of difference.

United States

When the United States of America was establishing itself as a new nation, the framers of the Constitution did not “remember the ladies¹,” and actively sought to exclude women from political participation in national and state legislatures.² Women were pushed into the domestic sphere with few rights as “citizens” of this new nation. Despite this, they still found ways to be present in the public sphere, particularly through the Abolitionist Movement.

Within the American Anti-Slavery Society, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton became leading figures in the fight to end slavery, but were limited by their gender. In 1840, after experiencing discrimination at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, these women were motivated to place their efforts in women’s suffrage. Many historians mark the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention as the origin of the Women’s Suffrage movement in the United States. Other essential figures, including Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Sojourner Truth, would soon join the national suffrage movement, giving speeches around the country advocating for federal legislation granting women the right to vote.

The Civil War (1860-1865) and the following years caused some division, in part due to the 15th Amendment, which granted U.S citizens the right to vote regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony rejected this because it did not include gender, therefore still allowing women to be excluded from the right to vote. In 1869, the same year the 15th Amendment was ratified, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association were founded by the two factions. Suffragists began to focus on state legislation, specifically looking westward, inspired by the territory of Wyoming, which had just granted suffrage to women. Over the remaining course of the nineteenth century, American suffragists also took tactics from their English counterparts, who were starting to use more militant tactics. They saw success in several Western territories and states, and by 1896 Colorado, Idaho, Utah had all also granted women full suffrage. After uniting in 1889, the National American Woman Suffrage Association attracted more and more women, particularly those involved with other social movements like temperance and child welfare. By 1912,

¹ Famously, in a letter to her husband, John Adams, Abigail Adams asked him to “remember the ladies” when establishing laws in the newly independent country. He viewed these sentiments as a joke.

² The distinction between federal and state in the United States is essential to understanding how Women’s Suffrage would develop and eventually succeed.

under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, NAWSA decided to press for a national amendment once again. It had been sixteen years after either chamber in Congress issued a report on women's suffrage. They used mass media (newspapers, pamphlets, etc.) and other publicity like marches, picketing, and publicity stunts to gain the attention of the country. The largest of these events was the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession in Washington, the day before President Wilson's inauguration.

Some more "radical" suffragists led by Alice Paul split and formed another organization, the National Women's Party. These "suffragettes" would picket in front of the White House, commit civil disobedience, and go on hunger strikes.³ These actions would lead to "The Night Terror," a crucial turning point for national opinion. Alice Paul and 30 other women picketing Wilson at the White House were arrested and detained at Occoquan work camp where they received physical mistreatment, including force-feeding through tubes, and lived in filthy rat-infested conditions.⁴ Finally after seven months, on November 14th the inmates requested better treatment only to be met with fierce brutality. These events gained the suffrage movement sympathy and support across the country. Both political parties publicly announced support, and even Wilson announced his support, citing women's participation in WWI as reason.⁵ The national amendment passed by two votes in the House of Representatives in January 1918, only to come one vote short in the Senate. The following year, a second attempt easily won both the House and the Senate. Over the next several months, three-fourths of state legislatures needed to ratify the amendment. The final battle came down to the Tennessee state legislature, which was passed by one vote. Harry Burns, a young representative, had received a strongly worded telegraph from his mother urging him to vote in favor of Women's Suffrage. On August 26th, 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment was signed into law.

This was a huge victory for Women's rights; however it is important to acknowledge that the Women's Suffrage was focused on upper and middle class white women. Black suffragists, such Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Nannie Helen Burroughs, often faced discrimination from white movement leaders, prompting the creation of the National Association of Colored

³ Suffragette, a term originally coined in England, was meant to belittle/demean female suffragists were seen as troublesome and unladylike. These women embraced the term instead.

⁴ Officials at the prison tried to get Alice Paul declared legally insane, so she could be indefinitely detained at a sanitarium.

⁵ Wilson was the target of much of the suffragette's picketing, referring to him as "Kaiser Wilson".

Women (NACW) in 1896. These women also deserve remembrance in the fight for equality. Unfortunately, it would not be until the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Black women would receive full franchise.

Canada

Prior to 1885, in Canada suffrage was, under the British North America Act, in the hands of the provinces. Back then, the right to vote was restricted to white males only. The Women's Suffrage Movement became prominent in the late 19th century. This struggle was led by white, middle-class women who saw suffrage in terms of class rather than gender. Among the earliest supporters of women's suffrage were black abolitionists and socialists who, similarly to the US, saw their opportunity to further their cause.

Unlike the suffrage movement in the US and the UK, Canadian women embraced peaceful means of protesting. Only a very small minority followed the likes of Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes by using violence. By the early 1900s, some propertied women had been granted the right to vote in the municipal council and school board elections

The first provincial victory for women took place in Manitoba. Among the leaders of the movement in Manitoba were author Nellie McClung and Margret Benedictsson. Through the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Political Equality League, they fundraised, protested and petitioned for an extension of voting rights. Finally, after submitting a petition with 40,000 signatures, the Political Equality League (which included both men and women) succeeded in amending the Manitoba Elections Act.

Soon after Manitoba, the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta followed suit, experiencing pressure from women's movements such as the WCTU and the farmers' movement. Though both groups wanted suffrage for women, the WCTU saw it as a way to enforce prohibition while the farmers' movement saw it as a basic democratic right. Despite the initiative taken by the different provinces, all women were not given the right to vote in federal elections until 1951.

In 1917, the federal government granted WWI nurses and the relatives of military personnel only the right to vote. Later on, in 1940, Québec was the last province to give women the right to vote. Asian women wouldn't be allowed to vote until 1948 and indigenous women until 1951.

Mexico

It is believed that the Women's Suffrage Movement in Mexico gained prominence during the late 19th century, as evidenced by the creation of *Las Violetas del Anahuac*, the first feminist magazine. The suffrage movement in Mexico took the center stage during the Mexican Revolution. This period of political turmoil and instability allowed women to take on an important role in society, and as a consequence to demand for their fair share in society.

The first General Women's Gathering to discuss the issue of suffrage took place in Yucatan (located in Southeastern Mexico) in 1916. During this Congress, Women demanded equality, education and citizenship. As a result of the First Feminist Congress, women were granted the right to vote in Yucatan in 1923 and Elvia Carrillo became the first Mexican woman elected to the local congress. However, she was forced to resign soon after due to political and social pressure. The political pressure to grant women the right to vote kept increasing, however, and several Mexican presidents took initiative to carry the policy forward. In 1937, Lázaro Cárdenas promoted a policy that would grant women full citizenship and got it passed by both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, yet it was never enacted or published.

In 1946, Miguel Alemán would seek to amend the constitution in order to grant women the right to vote in municipal elections. However, by this time there was an enormous pressure to grant women suffrage in federal elections. It was finally Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, who ran under the premise of extending suffrage to women, that fulfilled his campaign promise and granted all Mexican women the right to vote in 1953.

Argentina

During the 1800s, the Argentine elite ruled the country virtually unopposed. This monopoly over the government was, in part, due to electoral fraud and an antiquated voting system. In 1912, Argentine president Roque Sáenz Peña passed a bill making the voting process secret and mandatory for all men aged 18 and older. Though the Sáenz Peña law excluded women from voting, a suffrage movement demanding equality under the law had begun to consolidate.

Alicia Moreau de Justo, a college graduate with a medical degree and later wife to former Argentine president Juan B. Justo, founded in 1907 the Committee for Women's Suffrage.

Julieta Lanteri, an Italian-Argentina physician, was another one of the early women pushing for voting rights. In 1911, arguing that she met all the

requirements for suffrage, she became the first woman to vote in South America. Later on, during the 1919 elections, she would run for deputy under the party Feminist Nacional Union. She received 1700 votes (all from men). Thanks to women like Moreau, Lanteri, and Elvira Rawson the societal pressure to extend suffrage to women continued to increase. However, during times of political instability all proposals were rejected or ignored.

Finally, during Juan Domingo Peron's first term in office, the national government passed the law granting all women the same political rights and obligations that men had. It was Peron's second wife, Evita, who would address the crowd on September 23rd, 1947 to make the news public.

Brazil

The Feminist/Women's Suffrage Movement in Brazil was heavily influenced by similar movements taking place abroad. One of those movements was the one happening in the United States, with the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920. The Women's Suffrage Movement in Brazil differs from the ones in the United States and the United Kingdom in that the latter was propelled by mass movements and protests.

In Brazil, the Women's Suffrage Movement was led by elite white women and is famously known as "well behaved feminism". This term comes from the sharp distinction in Brazilian society at the time between the public and domestic spheres. Brazilian society believed that the role of women was in the home, and that allowing women to vote would affect their ability to perform their domestic duties. Another fear in Brazilian society was that giving women the right to vote would result simply in duplicating the vote of their husbands.

This widely accepted notions heavily influenced the movement, as women approached the movement with the ultimate objective of proving that the right to vote would not affect their domestic life. A key figure in the Brazilian Women's Suffrage Movement was Bertha Lutz, a biologist and human rights activist. Lutz became a famous figure for the Pan American feminist movement and led the push for change in Brazil and elsewhere. Like in many other places, the first places to grant women the right to vote were states or local municipalities. In 1927, Rio Grande do Norte amended its election laws allowing women to vote.

A year later, the municipality of Lajes elected a female mayor. The movement's first major victory came in 1932, when president Getulio Vargas signed a new electoral code allowing women to vote. Although this was a huge step in the right direction, the 1932 electoral code still restricted women's

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participation in political life. This new code allowed married women to vote only with permission from their husband, or (for widowed women) if they had property. It was finally in 1945 when women were granted equal political rights to those of males.

France

The French Revolution was one of the most influential events of the 18th century. In a nutshell, it brought the ideals of liberty, freedom and equality under the law to the forefront of French society. One of the outcomes of the French Revolution was the establishment of universal male suffrage briefly in the 1790s and later on in 1848 during the second French revolution. These revolutionary republic ideals, however, left women out of the picture.

The earliest Women's Suffrage Movements in France began in the 1830s, as women advocated for equal political rights. Early on, the arguments for women's suffrage varied. From the advantages of having maternal and nurturing participants in public life, to the need to outlaw alcohol, prevent wars and eliminate slums. The most famous Women's associations of the 20th century include the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWFA), created in 1904. And the Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes (UFSF)

The Women's suffrage movement in France was considerate moderate and significantly less militant than the movements in the US and the UK. Women's goal was to earn the right to vote solely through legal means. Within the UFSF, and the greater suffrage movement, some French women disagreed over who should get the right to vote. While a minority argued for a restricted vote for middle-class, educated women, a majority supported the idea of universal female suffrage.

The outbreak of WWI in 1914 saw the UFSF, and women in general, take a step back and support the war effort. Their work was vital in the fight against Germany and its allies. Yet after the war was over, the Senate blocked a bill that would have granted women the right to vote in 1919. Time and time again, throughout the 1920s & 30s, bills were introduced to the Chamber of Deputies and blocked by the senate. The outbreak of World War II saw the UFSF pause its activities and the movement dissipate. However, the effort continued after the conflict (though the UFSF was dismantled in 1945). After the expulsion of Germany from France, the new Government of General Charles de Gaulle granted women the right to vote in 1944.

Poland

The story of Polish women and the right to vote must be understood in the context of Poland's political development. Throughout most of its history, Poland was occupied and ruled by outside powers. This occupation came in the form of partitions, as outside power would split the territory apart and claim different parts of it. Despite the oppression that Polish nationalists suffered, a Polish national sentiment survived centuries of external control. It was finally following WWI in 1918 that Poland was able to combine three of its territories and form a cohesive and independent state.

The role of women in Poland dates back to the years of revolution and fighting against occupants. The earliest Women's Suffrage Movement in Poland was mainly propelled by the desire to grant women access to education. Many Polish suffragettes organized underground schools for women. The fight for Political rights came alongside access to education and better pay. In fact, many Women fought for their rights at the same time that they fought to become an independent state. Some of the most influential Women in Polish history include suffragist Maria Dulebianka, and famous physicist Marie Curie. After Poland gained its independence in 1918, all women were granted the right to vote.

India

The Women's Suffrage Movement in India, like many others around the world, was influenced heavily by the movements in the UK, as well as others. As the movement in Great Britain became more prominent, two English women of Indian heritage became key catalysts. These were Sophia Singh & Madam Bhikaji, two women that would influence many others to fight for the right to vote. The Women's movement in India coincided with the national struggle for independence from the British. During this conflict, women were relegated to smaller roles such as local protests and support of their male relatives. However, the movement took a giant leap forward in 1917 with the creation of the Women's India Association which brought Women's issues to the forefront of Indian political society.

It was in 1919 that things started to turn for women, as the British passed the Government of India Act. Though this act did not give women the right to vote, it gave provincial legislatures the agency to choose. By 1930, some women were allowed to vote and stand for legislative elections. In 1935, the movement earned a new victory with the passing of the second Government of India Act. This act gave wives and widows of male voters the ability to vote, along with women with literary qualifications. Though this greatly expanded the number of women

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allowed to vote, the number remained relatively small. By the 1940s, Women's Suffrage was a major political issue in India & with independence from Great Britain in 1950 came universal suffrage for all adults regardless of sex.

Saudi Arabia

The story of Women's Suffrage in Saudi Arabia is quite peculiar. We are used to referring to the 20th century as the time period where women finally gained the right to vote and become equal (in theory) to men under the law. However, this does not apply to all countries around the globe. Saudi Arabia is one of those exceptions

The restricted role of women in the social and political life of Saudi Arabia has been heavily influenced by the country's political and religious context. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Since its creation, the country has been ruled by an autocratic and hereditary monarchy propelled by the alliance between Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab & Muhammad bin Saud. The most well-known restrictions for women include the inability to drive and vote.

Informally, there has been a Women's movement in Saudi Arabia since the 1960s, however, many historians argue that this movement became prominent in the 1990s. During that year, a group of 47 women went driving and broke the country's law that forbids them from doing so. This rebellious act brought the issue of women's role to center stage. In 2011, after many years of demanding political rights, Women were granted the right to vote by King Abdullah. In 2015, women voted for the first time in municipal elections. Many activists and outside observers believe that this act sent an incredibly powerful message to Saudi society and will lead to further change.

Cameroon

The Women's Suffrage Movement in Cameroon, as in much of Africa, has been heavily influenced and impacted by the continent's history of imperialism. Cameroon was originally "colonized" by Germany in the late 19th century and exploited for its banana, cocoa, and rubber plantations. Following Germany's defeat in WWI, Cameroon came under French and British joint control. This was one of the many "mandate territories" of the League of Nations.

French Cameroon consisted of almost all of the territory previously controlled by the Germans while the British claimed a small part in Western Cameroon bordering Nigeria. The Women's Suffrage movement in French

Cameroon was heavily influenced by the French law that granted women the right to vote in 1944. This raised several questions and sparked debates on Women's right to vote outside of continental France. The expansion of suffrage in Cameroon took place from 1946 to 1956.

In 1946, French authorities in Africa granted male and female "évolués" the right to vote. This meant that only individuals such as chiefs, ministers, civil servants, etc could vote. At that time, very few women could access such positions. Later on in 1947, France extended suffrage to all those inhabitants who were literate in French or Arabic. Once again, few women met these requirements due to the restrictions on education. Another expansion to suffrage took place in 1951 where all heads of households, taxpayers and mothers of at least 2 children were allowed to vote. This significantly increased the number of female voters. Finally in 1956, with the passing of the loi-cadre, all adults 21 and older were granted the right to vote.

British Cameroon took a slightly different path to Women's Suffrage. Prior to the passing of any British law regarding Women's right to vote, the participation of these in politics varied across the board. In some communities only men were allowed to vote, others restricted this right to taxpaying women, and some others appointed a few women to councils. Despite this "autonomy", few women participated of the political process across the territory. In 1957, the British authorities adopted the Southern Cameroons Electoral Regulations which indicated that women could vote and stand for election. This act also created a category within the legislature that was filled by one women appointee.

Liberia

In 1822, the American Colonization Society began sending freed slaves from the United States to the territory now known as Liberia. The arrival of the former slaves created tension with the native population, and the "Americo-Liberians" mainly intermarried. Soon after, in 1847, the Americo-Liberians declared independence and established a system of modern slavery with the native population. Following the end of World War II, Liberia began a serious modernization effort funded mainly by the US. It also became more involved in International Affairs and was one of the founding members of the United Nations.

In 1946, the Liberian Government amended the previously adopted Constitution and granted all women the right to vote. Despite this victory for Liberian Women, the latter half of the 20th century was marked by political turmoil and military violence. The first Liberian Civil War lasted until 1997 and

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the Second Civil War spanned from 1999 to 2003. After the end of the Civil War, a strong Women's Movement was created led by Nobel Prize Laureate Leymah Gbowee. This group of women launched non-violent protests and demanded peace and an end to human rights violations. In 2005, during the first post-conflict elections, Liberians elected the first female president in all of Africa.

Australia

In 1902, the Australian Parliament passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902 law enabling women (except those who were “aboriginal natives”) to vote. Women’s suffrage in Australia was one of the earliest objectives of the movement for gender equality in Australia.

It began to be socially and politically accepted and legislated during the late 19th century, beginning with South Australia in 1894 and Western Australia in 1899.

In 1902, the newly established Australian Parliament passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902, which set a uniform law enabling women (except those who were “aboriginal natives” of Australia, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, unless excepted under section 41 of the constitution) to vote at federal elections and to stand for the federal Parliament. This removed gender discrimination in relation to electoral rights for federal elections in Australia. By 1911, the remaining Australian states had legislated for women’s suffrage for state elections. It took longer before women could stand for parliament throughout Australia and even longer before they were actually elected.

New Zealand

The story of New Zealand is well-known as the first ever territory to grant women the right to vote. Though New Zealand was a pioneer in Women’s Rights, during the early stages of colonial life women were restricted to the domestic sphere of influence. Like in most other countries, the movement for Women’s Suffrage was influenced by movements in Northern Europe, the UK and the US.

Also similar to other Women’s movements around the world, women sought equal political rights in order to deal with the issues of alcohol and other “moral” conflicts. The ideas that fueled this early Women’s movement were those of British philosopher John Stuart Mill who strongly believed in granting Women the right to vote and choose over their destiny. Another very influential force was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, a group that became influential in many parts of the world. Although the fight for Women’s Suffrage saw great resistance from

different groups of society such as men, the liquor industry and politicians such as Henry Smith Fish, they were granted the right to vote in 1893.

Conclusion

The right of women to vote is a matter of fact today, but at the time when it was proposed it was a revolutionary demand. Comparing and contrasting different countries on each continent, we review the history of women's suffrage focusing on the important question that circulated starting with the 19th century: "Could and should women obtain the right to vote?" The question expanded in time as part of a general debate about women's political power and civil rights. Initially, the leading perception was that women's influence in political life should come through the men in their lives and that it must happen behind closed doors. Gradually, we see more countries turning to the idea that women can have direct action in politics and that they can participate in public life in a variety of roles.

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