

Did the suffragettes help or hinder the cause of the cause British Women's Suffrage Movement?

This report will discuss whether or not the suffragettes helped or hindered the cause of the British Women's Suffrage Movement. The three different perspectives that I will talk about are Emmeline Pankhurst's (who believed the suffragettes did help the cause), Viscount Helmsley's (who thought that the suffragettes hindered the cause) and Joyce Marlow's point of view. Then I will discuss which point of view is most convincing to me and why.

Perspective 1 – Emmeline Pankhurst

Emmeline Pankhurst believed that the suffragettes helped the cause of the British Women's Suffrage Movement. Pankhurst herself had been a suffragist- she was a member of the Manchester women suffrage committee and later the Women's Franchise League. Pankhurst expressed her belief by stating "*When we have tried every way, but we have had contempt poured upon us. Violence is the only way that we have to get the power every citizen should have*". Through this quote, she expressed how the efforts of the non-violence movements have led to no change yet a tireless fight. For example, the actions that the suffragists took was one in 1866 where women took a petition to parliament in which they asked to be allowed to vote. However, no action was taken, and the actions of the women were ignored. And again in 1907, women from Northern England, who worked in the cotton and synthetic industry brought forward a petition appealing the right for women to vote. The petition gained over 37,000 signatures. However, again, the petition failed and the movement was ignored. These repetitive events were what motivated Pankhurst to believe that violence would be the only way for change to be made. It led to her creating the Women's Social and Political Union, enabling a more confrontational method to be used.

Pankhurst took many actions during her lifetime. From 1908 to 1909 she was imprisoned three times. One of her imprisonments was due to her presenting a leaflet issued to people to 'rush the House of Commons'. Pankhurst emphasises the importance of this action as the government had blocked a conciliation bill on women's suffrage. Pankhurst knew that the non-violence movements did not have enough power to create change and the length of time this had gone on became tired and drained the hope of many. For Pankhurst however, she had gone through years of involvement with the suffrage movement and it was the lack of progress that caused her to become fed up with the system.

Although Pankhurst was a suffragist herself, she had become disillusioned after seeing so many of the bills failing. The bills were passed through legal means, using the system and following the process. This is what the suffragists had done, Pankhurst herself was involved in it. She knew that it had not worked and believed something else needed to be done that was more confrontational. Hence, Pankhurst introduced violent methods in order to create a wake-up call towards the government and create a militant movement in hopes of faster change. Pankhurst states "We were willing to break laws that we might force men to give us the right to make laws". This statement from Pankhurst shows her militant attitude towards the violent movement and the strong hopes she has that the violent methods may work.

Emmeline Pankhurst's childhood encouraged her political views growing up. Her Father, Robert, was involved in reforms and her grandfather was an active member during the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. Her grandmother was in the Anti-Corn League which was known for their influence that helped to minimise the tax on corn and oats so that food may become more affordable. Pankhurst's political family allowed her to grow to become strong and opinionated in her views which is evident through her demanding and militant speeches. When Pankhurst was 14, her mother took her to witness and be a part of a public meeting regarding women's rights in Manchester. This meeting was the inspiration that made Pankhurst want to become a suffragist. Pankhurst had the support of her parents as they both were in support of women's suffrage. She is a primary source and has a first-hand account of what life was like for women in Victorian times.

Perspective 2 – Viscount Helmsley (suffragettes hindered the cause of the British Women's Suffrage Movement):

On the contrary, Viscount Helmsley believed that the suffragettes did not help the cause of the British Women's Suffrage Movement. Viscount Helmsley believed that the suffragettes hindered the British Suffrage Movement because women using force is disgusting and gives the whole sex a bad name. He reminded us in his speeches during the early 20th century that if women were allowed the vote, it will be the militant woman who used violent methods such as throwing rocks at windows and burning the house of Arthur du Cros that will be taking the greatest part in politics. He goes on to ask, during his speech to the House of Commons, if this is what people of Victorian England really want, and how society would be impacted by this. During the Victorian era, the idea that women were supposed to remain in the household while men were the only ones in public involvement in politics was a common one, this is what has influenced the perspective of Helmsley. Women should be devoted to their husbands and families. In the Victorian era, Helmsley's view was a dominant one and they believed that women were not meant to be out in the street protesting but should stay in their place and which was in the household, looking after children. Helmsley's perspective is shaped by his own experiences and position of power. From a very young age, he was involved with politics. He was born into privilege and inherited the title from his father. If women gained the vote then Helmsley and those who were in power would have had to think about what changes would come, this is what has shaped his perspective.

Perspective 3: Historian Fern Riddell

There is a third perspective among historians that has emerged in the last couple of decades and that is the idea that the suffragettes helped and hindered the movement. Fern Riddell, a British cultural historian with a particular focus on the Victorian era, takes this stance. Riddell's main argument, for the suffragettes hindering the cause, is that their actions actually made people worry and fearful of them. She uses primary evidence from the time discussing confrontational methods employed by the suffragettes such as bombing, arson and chemical attacks. Riddell then compares the past attacks on public transportation to those today and states that as we can imagine and have seen in our modern world, of course, this makes people fearful. She goes on to discuss why people were fearful, particularly on account of the fact that women were supposed to be in their households, getting married and raising children rather than acting in such a violent manner.

Riddell's point and emphasis on the traditional role of women are also valid as this is what we have already seen with Helmsley's perspective. She states the government were fearful of the suffragettes returning to their violent methods following World War I and this is what made Parliament give women the vote in 1918. Ultimately the government did not want to deal with any internal attacks or disruptions at home, they wanted to focus on ensuring the economy and society of Britain would return. The focus could not be taken away from recovery and ultimately, Riddell argues, this is what gave women over 30 years of age the right to vote following the war. Riddell's perspective is valid as had the suffragettes been successful in their attempt to gain the vote completely then women would have had the vote earlier instead of waiting until 1918. I do believe that Riddell's perspective is valid as the suffragettes were able to gain attention, but it was not always positive. However, Britain did not emerge out of World War I with a strong economy like the United States of America, so they had to take time to put their energy into recovery. Having to fight two different battles, recovery and within, would have been a lot, and this meant the suffragettes were influential in achieving the vote for woman.

I believe that the most convincing perspective is Emmeline Pankhurst's. She is right that women could not get the vote by just using the non-violent method. Being a suffrage and being more confrontational drew attention to them and made people stop and think about what society was doing at the time to women. Emmeline Pankhurst knew what life was like having not used nonviolence and she realised that violence was the only way. She is also a primary source piece of evidence and we are getting a first-hand account of what happened during the British Women's Suffrage Movement.