

## Chapter 9 THE FIRST WAVE OF FEMINISM

During the first wave of feminism, by far the most prominent cause was votes for women. If women could not vote, there were relatively few ways in which they could improve their condition in society. The women's suffrage movement had its roots in 1832 when the Reform Law was passed in Britain. The name of this law was odd, because although it gave the vote to many middle-class men who had previously lacked it, it removed the vote from unmarried women with property by inserting in the act the word "male" before "persons" (Wilson, 1996, 20). Now women were worse off than they had been before the bill's passage. The movement began to pick up steam in 1867 with the foundation in England of the National Society for Women's Suffrage. This group worked hard for many years with little success, so in 1903 Mrs Pankhurst founded the far more militant Women's Social and Political Union. It was this group with its acts of violence that probably forced the British government to give some women the vote in 1918.

During my extensive reading about behavior change I came across a huge number of "click" or "jolt" experiences, where suddenly a person realized a truth he or she had not seen before, but there is no way of knowing if such experiences represent a large proportion of the means by which attitudes and behavior are changed. Maybe other ways are more important, but have been little documented. Fortunately, we have a statistical analysis by Olive Banks (1986) of 116 people actively involved in Britain in the first wave of feminism; for this group at least we can compare the specific feminist causes that individuals worked for to improve conditions for women.

Banks' sample includes 98 women and 18 men, all born before 1891. These individuals lived at a time when women were considered subordinate to men with few rights by custom, religion, or law. During the 1800s, British women had won access to higher education and obtained some legal benefits, but they were still far from having equal rights with men. To go against accepted convention meant that most of these respondents during their early lifetime had been subject to either small or large jolts that had made them change their behavior from that of the majority. There was much scope for improving the status of women beyond winning the vote, which those in Banks' sample addressed by working for a number of causes (Table 10-1).

Table 10-1 Feminist issues addressed by first-wave feminists (with many working for more than one cause) - from Banks, 1986, 115.

	Percentage involvement	
	Women (N=98)	Men (N=18)
Suffrage	89 %	100%
Education	30 %	50%
Employment	46 %	50%
Legal Rights	24 %	39%
Contagious Diseases Acts	13 %	22%
Birth Control	19 %	17%
Women's Trade Union Movement	15 %	6%
Family Allowance	9 %	6%

People who became active feminists working for women and for women's suffrage during the first wave of feminism were rebelling against the accepted tradition

of the time. In her analysis, Banks indicates the relative importance of the different routes by which individuals became feminist activists. These categories are **Personal Frustration**, **Social and Political Reform**, **Philanthropy**, and **Personal Recruitment**.

**Personal Frustration** was most important in turning women into active feminists--one-third of the women Banks sampled were so motivated, especially those in her sample born earlier rather than later. Two groups within this category were **discrimination in work** and **restricted lives**. Both middle class and working class women (15% of the 98 women in the sample) were acutely aware that they suffered inequities in the work world--in pay, in work offered, and in working conditions. Cicely Hamilton, for example, was forced into the paid labour force when her father died. She became a pupil-teacher first, and then an actress. She earned less than an actor for the same work, and was twice fired when the manager's mistress wanted her role.

A similar number (15% of the total), all but one middle-class and most unmarried, suffered personal frustration because of their narrow lives. The most prominent was Florence Nightingale, who finally escaped the triviality of her existence to become a nurse/ administrator and a social planner. Another example is Emily Davies who dedicated herself to obtaining a university education for women that she herself had been denied.

Eight women suffered frustration because of unhappy marriages. Caroline Norton, for example, would never have worked to change the laws on behalf of women if she had not herself endured a disastrous marriage and found that upon divorce she had no legal right even to visit her children. Her activism caused the Infants Custody Act to be passed in 1839 which gave women some parental rights to their children.

**Social and Political Reform** was important to many of the women (27%) and men (39%) included in this survey because they had grown up in families with radical attitudes. These families had worked for such causes as the Anti-Corn Law League, the anti-slavery campaign, and parliamentary reform, so it was a short step to the cause of women. Indeed, twelve women had mothers and sometimes fathers who were themselves active feminists or pro-feminists; these women needed no outside inspiration or jolt to carry on the feminist cause.

**Philanthropy** drew 14% of the women in the sample, all middle class, into feminism. For example, Mary Carpenter who worked initially with child criminals and Louisa Twining who was concerned with women in workhouses both later supported women's suffrage because they realized that women who had the vote could make a difference to their pet causes. All these women were affiliated with a religion; their motivation differed sharply from that of women included in the category of personal frustration.

**Personal Recruitment** was the other main way by which individuals became feminist activists: "a largely unfocused personal resentment, or a very general radicalism, was turned into specifically feminist channels." This was accomplished by speeches, discussion groups, personal friendships, magazines, and in one case by a book. Two early influential magazines were *The Englishwoman's Review* and the Unitarian *The Monthly Repository*. The book was *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill who was important to feminists as a philosopher who could attract men

as well as women to the cause and whose reputation gave him a hearing in Parliament. The network formed by feminists through personal recruitment was vital in strengthening the convictions of the feminist themselves, and in bringing in new members.

In summary, for at least one radical cause of long ago, individuals were moved to become active by the following main routes, keeping in mind that these overlap to some extent:

1. Personal experience of inequity,
2. Intellectual realization of social injustice and knowing that reform is possible,
3. A related route of branching out from another good (philanthropic) cause, and
4. Personal persuasion by other individuals or from reading material.

### **Suffragettes**

We have seen above that there are at least four ways in which people may be drawn to work for a good cause. We are interested here not in all of these ways, but in incidents that acted suddenly on a person and left a lasting effect. In the many books I have read by and about Suffragettes, approximately equal numbers of them have been converted to the women's cause by personal experience which shocked and offended them, and by logical thought and argument. (The former includes women from Banks' first category, and the latter from her second and fourth categories.) These two groups can be designated as **Visceral** and **Rational**.

### **Visceral Experiences**

Among the visceral experiences, and one with which most of us can identify, was finding out that women were paid less than men for the same job, as **Lucretia Mott** (1793-1880) realized when she was 15. Mott was born into the Society of Friends, or Quakers, which ostensibly treated men and women equally. When she was 11, she attended a Quaker boarding school. When she herself became an apprentice teacher four years later, Mott was amazed to learn that the salaries of her new colleagues depended on their sex. **The experienced girls' teacher was paid 40 pounds a year, while a young man of 19 with far less experience received 100 pounds.** Although one taught girls and the other boys, these students all paid the same tuition. Her biographer writes, "Until this moment Lucretia had not realized the existence of inequality purely on the basis of sex. Now it hit her in the face. That she herself was not being paid at all did not worry her; she was, after all, just an apprentice. But someday she would be a full-fledged teacher...and when that day came, she would demand equal pay for equal work" (Bacon, 1980, 25). When Mott began teaching again after her marriage, she worked equally with another woman, so that there was no controversy about disparity of wages. She worked for women's and blacks' causes for the rest of her life.

Mott, along with two friends, was even more thoroughly aroused by an incident over 30 years later. This time she did not merely observe a case of injustice, but experienced one herself. In 1840 she and her husband James Mott, along with four women, were named delegates from Pennsylvania to the World's Anti-Slavery

Convention to be held in London in June. When the group arrived in London, however, they found that the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was against women being accepted as delegates to the convention. Anti-women American delegates argued it would lower the dignity of the convention and invite ridicule if women were included, to which the Motts replied that the same reason had been raised to exclude blacks from Pennsylvania abolition meetings. The anti-woman faction further contended that women were constitutionally unfit for public or business meetings, to which the Motts rejoined that blacks also had been declared in America to be similarly unfit to mingle with white men.

**When the World Convention opened, acceptable delegates, all men, were ushered into the main section of the meeting hall while the women delegates were seated in a side wing from where they could observe but not take part in the proceedings.** The first item of business concerned the women delegates-- should they be admitted as full voting members? Although one man argued that it was ridiculous to call a convention a world-wide one when half the world was excluded, 90 per cent of the men voted to reject the women (Bacon, 1980, 91-92; Howe, 1926, 213).

Two new friends of Lucretia Mott observed these proceedings along with Lucretia. One was **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** (1815-1902), newly married to an American delegate, and the other **Anne Knight** (1786-1862), who wrote poetry for children. Both were appalled at what they saw. As Stanton walked home arm and arm with her new friend Mott, "commenting on the incidents of the day, we resolved to hold a convention as soon as we returned home, and to form a society which would advocate the rights of women" (Mattison and Storey, 1992, 18). These women devoted the rest of their lives to women's suffrage in America, and Knight became an early champion of women's rights in Great Britain. The movement for women's suffrage both in England and America has been dated from this World's Antislavery Convention.

**Susan B. Anthony** (1820-1906) had a similar visceral epiphany in connection with her temperance efforts (Barry, 1988, 4, 66). She had worked at an early age for anti-slavery and temperance causes, but she did not become galvanized over women's issues as well until she was 32. In 1852 she attended a meeting in Albany, New York, called by the Sons of Temperance. She was a delegate from the Rochester "Daughters". Women had traditionally kept quiet at these meetings, but as the men's discussion droned on she finally decided to join in herself. **When Anthony rose to speak, a man prevented her by declaring that the sisters were not invited there to be heard, but to listen and learn.** Anthony was so angry that she marched out of the meeting followed by other women.

Anthony decided that since women weren't welcome by men as temperance workers in their own right, they would form their own organization to be called the Woman's State Temperance Society. She announced to the press, "We are heartily sick and tired of the round of unmeaning encomiums which Gentlemen Temperance lecturers are pleased to lavish upon our sex." From this beginning, Anthony went on to become one of the best-known feminists in the United States. She was a founder of the National Woman Suffrage Association and helped compile a history of the women's

movement.

**Harriet Grote** (1792-1878) would have felt more personally affronted when she was involved in a legal case about 1850 (Herstein, 1985, 75). She was the wife of historian George Grote and she had no idea of the peculiarities of Common Law in England at that time. Grote appeared in court to give evidence when some of her property was stolen, and **she was astonished to learn that according to law, her watch and her purse belonged to her husband.** "When the legal reason for this was explained to her, she became so indignant that she joined the feminist ranks." Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929) was equally horrified when she heard in court that her purse, which she accused a young man of stealing, was the property of her husband, Henry Fawcett. She, too, after that, became deeply involved in the women's movement (Caine, 1988, 171). Fawcett was also affected by rational arguments, as we shall see shortly.

An unknown man was converted to the women's movement by the astonishing sight of British bobbies beating up unarmed women whose only offence was that they wanted to talk to the prime minister (Pethick-Lawrence, 1938, 249; Sharp, 1926, 121-122). In November 1910, Prime Minister Asquith of Britain indicated in a speech that the government would once again not consider giving the vote to women. Immediately a large group of women decided to protest to him in person this decision. When they reached Parliament Square, they were met with violence by crowds of men who were determined to stop their advance. Hertha Ayrton writes, "we had to run the gauntlet of organized gangs of policemen in plain clothes, dressed like roughs, who nearly squeezed the breath out of our bodies, the policemen in official clothes helping them.... Women were thrown from policemen in uniform to policemen in plain clothes, literally till they fainted." Shortly afterward two of the women died of heart attacks. Fifty women were laid up with injuries they had received.

A man who watched this violence against women was aghast. **He approached a woman who had been thrown to the ground and kicked by a policeman and said to her, Ayrton reports, "I have been against women's suffrage all my life, but by God, I hope you'll get the vote now!"** He said to the policeman: 'You're not a man, you're a brute.' What a libel on the brutes!".

The **Marchioness of Londonderry's** (1879-1959) visceral decision to become a feminist was not created by a sudden external event, but by the realization in the Nursery that boys were valued more highly than girls, for no reason she could fathom. She was raised by a Nanny, along with her younger sister and her brother Eric, who was a year older than she. **The marchioness realized, early on, that her Nanny adored her brother more than her sister or herself because he was a boy.** She also adored her brother, because he was a fine lad, but she deeply resented her Nanny's preference. "The seeds of the future Suffragist were sown in those days, as I used to tell my Nanny later," she wrote (Londonderry, 1938, 175).

**Nellie McClung** (1873-1951) in Canada **was converted to a career of feminist activism** not by hearing a silver-tongued orator preaching about equality or by visiting slums and seeing there desperate women, but **by being pregnant** (McClung 1935, 304ff; 1945, 15-16). She suffered terribly from nausea, writing "For my stomach was sick, and I saw no beauty anywhere... why had not something been found to save women from this infernal nausea? What good was it? If it had been a man's disease, it would have been made the subject of scientific research and relieved long ago. But women could suffer; it kept them humble! I had heard about the curse of Eve, and here it was in full measure. But what useful purpose did it serve? Life at that moment looked like a black conspiracy against women.... Women had endured too much and said nothing. I certainly was not going to be meek and mild and resigned. Women should change conditions, not merely endure them, and I was positive something should be done."

McClung had attended a political meeting with a feminist friend before her marriage, but had found it uninspiring, attended aside from themselves only by men, none of whom spoke to them. The speaker refused to answer their questions on the franchise for women and on homesteading rights. At that time, she had chosen not to become involved in politics. She changed her mind when her own suffering led her to empathize with suffering women everywhere. This example of visceral experiences that proved traumatic, like that of the rest with the exception of two, were experienced by the person who became the feminist activist. The two were people who observed traumatic experiences (finding that a man was paid far more than a woman for the same job, and seeing women physically attacked by police).

### **Rational Experiences**

Rational experiences are those that occasion change by appealing to the intellect rather than to the senses. The examples given here involved public speakers, conversations with already committed feminists, and the contents of books.

Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891) was one of the early feminists to work in England for votes for women (Strachey, 1978, 106). In 1866 she was the only person to deliver a paper on this subject to the Social Science Association in Manchester. There was little discussion or interest in her paper, except for one Manchester woman who had never before considered the feminist cause. She was **Lydia Becker** (1827-1890). Before then Becker had had no thought of public work at all, but devoted her time to the sciences, especially botany and astronomy. **Bodichon's well argued paper on women's suffrage was a turning point in Becker's life; "from that moment until the very day of her death she remained plunged wholly in the Cause,** in which, as will be seen presently, she became a very central figure."

Another speaker was Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958) who gave a talk on women's suffrage in Manchester in 1905 to a group which included **Annie Kenney** (1879-1953) and a friend (Kenney, 1924, 28). This was a topic new to the two women. Kenney had been born in Lancashire, one of eleven children. When she was ten, her parents arranged for her to work in a factory half-days and continue part time with her

schooling. At 13 she became full-time in a cotton factory, working from six in the morning to 5.30 at night. When she was 20, she became interested in reading the labour journal *Clarion* where she was exposed to literature and articles on nature, philosophy and life.

**Kenney was so impressed by Christabel Pankhurst's speech that she went forward to talk to her, wanting to be involved in the women's movement.** Pankhurst asked her to come to her home in Manchester the next Saturday afternoon and then to arrange a meeting for her to address other factory workers. Kenney writes, "The following week I lived on air; I simply could not eat; I wanted to be quiet and alone. I did not feel elated or excited. A sense of deep stillness took possession of me. It was as though half of me was present; where the other half was I never asked. For the first time in my life I experienced real loneliness. I instinctively felt that a great change had come. I was losing my old girl-friends of the factory."

Aside from her choir which had agreed to sing, only two friends came to the first meeting Kenney organized, but she continued to be enthralled with Christabel Pankhurst and continued to meet and plan with her about winning the vote for women. Before long she had left the factory and become a full-time organizer, setting off with two pounds to "rouse London" for the cause. She was soon one of the top members of the suffragettes and worked for women for many years.

When the **Hertha Ayrton** (1854-1923) was a little girl, she was required each year, as a Jew, to read the Old Testament in the Bible, including the Book of Esther (Sharp, 1926, 190). She was appalled at the story of Vashti, queen of the territory from India to Ethiopia. On one occasion the king, Ahasuerus, had been entertaining his subjects in grand style while Vashti feasted elsewhere with the women of the royal house. On the seventh day of celebrating, "when the heart of the king was merry with wine," he ordered Vashti to appear before him so that his people could admire her beauty. But Vashti refused to come, which angered the king. He and his advisors agreed that if it became known the king's wife was allowed to disobey her husband, other wives might follow suit. So "he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people." Ahasuerus got rid of Vashti, and had virgins sent to his palace so he could choose a new queen, which turned out to be Esther.

Many years later Ayrton said in a speech, "**I well remember to this day the indignation that used to surge up in me at the treatment of Vashti, and especially at the subsequent proclamation of Ahasuerus. That story made me a suffragette at a very early age,** though all unconsciously to my pastors and masters, who imagined it was producing a very different effect--and perhaps too to myself." She was one of those people apparently born with a passion for justice.

Ayrton became sensitized to the lot of women by reading the Bible, but it was Christabel Pankhurst who was instrumental in recruiting her and her daughter into suffragette activism (Sharp, 1926, 192-3). Ayrton, a practising physicist, made the decision to leave her experimental research and become political in 1906 when she

attended a meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union, then only a small group of women. Ayrton writes, "One of the speakers was...**a beautiful young girl who did not appear to be more than twenty years old, but who in her short speech impressed me profoundly with her clear judgment and her keen political insight.** It was Christabel Pankhurst. My daughter, who was with me, and who was then a student at the University of London, at once decided to join the Union and to devote all her leisure to promoting its work."

**Ethel Smyth** (1858-1944), the British composer, was jolted toward the cause of women's suffrage by the remarks of a male friend (Smyth, 1933, 191). For many years she had been an opponent of this cause without really thinking about it. She felt that the vote was unnecessary and that women activists were making themselves ridiculous with their militant behavior. In 1910 she received a letter from Lady Constance Lytton, addressed to her because she had recently received an honorary Doctor of Music degree from the University of Durham. It inquired about her views on suffrage for women. Smyth discussed her antipathy with an Austrian novelist, Hermann Bahr.

Bahr was amazed to hear her. He said, "Why, the militant movement is the one really alive issue in England...perhaps in Europe, and your **Mrs. Pankhurst is in my opinion the most astounding personality that even England-- a country that is for ever turning out new types of genius-- has yet produced.**" He said that he had heard many women speak on the issue of the vote, and had never once heard a poor speech from these so-called wild women ..."the only people who are dealing with realities."

Ethel Smyth was embarrassed at her stand. Two weeks later, she went to hear Mrs Pankhurst speak. Smyth was immediately won over to her cause. Before long the two women had become fast friends, with Ethel devoting two years of her life to women's rights, including a two-month stint in Holloway Prison for breaking a window on behalf of the suffragettes.

It was perhaps the shock of hearing a man defend women's suffrage that made Smyth really listen to what he said. **Constance Lytton** (1869-1923) was equally swayed by words, but in her case they came from a few committed women perhaps paying especial attention to her because she was a wealthy aristocrat (Pethick-Lawrence, 1938, 193, 199, 247). Lady Lytton, the daughter of a former Viceroy of India, inherited her money in 1906 when her godmother died. She wasn't interested in philanthropy, but became involved instead with the revival of Folk Song and Dance which opened to her a new world. While on a holiday in 1908 with girls immersed in this revival, she met several suffragettes, including Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954) and Jessie Kenney. She disapproved of suffragettes, but listened to Kenney's stories about her recent experience in prison because she was interested in prison reform. She was so moved by the arguments of the suffragettes that she wrote a pamphlet combatting statements by anti-suffragettes. Pethick-Lawrence writes, "**Her researches led her to realize that, owing to inequalities in the law, women suffered grievous harm, and the interests of children were neglected.** But she had no wish to take any active part

in bringing about redress. Any kind of public life was constitutionally abhorrent to her."

Two months later, Lytton was forced to action despite herself when Mrs Pankhurst, her daughter Christabel, and a third woman were arrested for potentially creating a public disturbance. Thousands of people thronged outside the House of Commons to support them. Lytton spent the evening of October 13th hurrying back and forth between the House of Commons, the police station, and the magistrate trying to organize bail and have the three women treated as political prisoners rather than criminals. She spoke with Mrs Pankhurst through a small grating in the cell door of what looked like "an animal's den." Finally she collected mattresses and rugs to take to the cells. Pethick-Lawrence writes, "All these experiences had changed her from an interested onlooker into a red-hot militant. She had already determined to offer herself for the next deputation [of women risking arrest for the cause]."

Lytton became one of the central figures of the suffragette movement. She was arrested several times, once pretending to be "Miss Jane Warton" so that she could see how unknown women were treated as prisoners. During this incarceration she was force-fed, a torture that brought about her future collapse and eventual paralysis. Because of the public outcry, the government soon stopped force-feeding prisoners in response to their hunger strikes.

**Philip Snowden** (1864-1937), a long-time socialist and chairman of the Independent Labour Party, was moved to support women when, at 40 in 1905, he married Ethel Annakin (Cross, 1966, 61-4, 91). Annakin (1880-1951) was a socialist lecturer with a strong devotion to the cause of women's suffrage: "**Ethel had very strong opinions and, as no one else in the world could, she was able to influence her husband.**" Before his marriage, he had been actively unsympathetic to the women's cause. Afterward, he "went a long way towards accepting his wife's views and voiced the women's cause at every opportunity."

One book which serendipitously worked to jolt at least one person to the women's cause was a biography of Abraham Lincoln which **Millicent Garrett Fawcett** read (Caine, 1988, 171-2). It told of Lincoln who "saw a young mulatto girl exposed naked before the buyers and handled by them as if she were an animal.... One of his companions declared that Lincoln burst out 'My God, boys, let us get away from this. If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard'."

**The horrifying image of the degradation of the slave girl stayed with Fawcett for life. It was reinforced soon after by two casual conversations she heard accidentally about women as property.** In one, two companions wondered why a couple of their acquaintance was estranged. One woman said 'I cannot see what she has to complain of. LOOK HOW HE DRESSES HER!' This remark infuriated Fawcett because it so obviously defined the woman as owned by the man. In the other conversation, she overheard one woman telling another at a parish fair that what sold well were "THINGS THAT ARE REALLY USEFUL, SUCH AS BUTTERFLIES FOR THE HAIR!" She yearned for a time when intelligent and active-minded women would cease to regard 'butterflies for the hair' as 'really useful'.

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