



Unit 2:

Irishwomen's Campaign for the Vote

A Short History

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IRISHWOMEN'S CAMPAIGN FOR THE VOTE

In late nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, a series of movements developed to challenge the laws, regulations and customs preventing female participation in politics, commerce and education. In Ireland, feminist action was focused on three main issues: married women's property, education, and the parliamentary vote.

WOMEN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY IRELAND

The restrictions imposed on women under Irish common law affected every social class. When a woman married, her inherited or earned property came under her husband's control. Women had legal custody of their children only until they were seven years of age, and their access to education was limited. For middle class girls, education was focused on the attainment of 'accomplishments' that would lead to an advantageous marriage rather than intellectual development or economic independence. Access to university and entry into the professions was confined to men. Because they could not vote in local or parliamentary elections, women were powerless to influence change.

Successful lobbying by first-wave feminists in Britain and Ireland resulted in gradual improvements to married women's property rights as well as reform in education for women.

In 1870 the first of a series of acts giving married women more control of their property was passed. Eight years later, the provisions of the Intermediate Education Act were extended to include girls. The 1879 University Act gave women access to degrees in the new Royal University - an examining and degree-awarding body that did not require attendance at specified institutions that excluded women.

After the creation of the National University of Ireland under the terms of the Irish Universities Act (1908), women became more prominent in higher education. They met like-minded colleagues at university and formed important networks that would extend into the world of Gaelic revivalism and radical politics.

The campaign for women's suffrage (the right of women to vote) took place against the backdrop of ever-increasing male eligibility to vote. While the Great Reform Act of 1832 extended the franchise (the right to vote) for men, the insertion of the phrase 'male person', explicitly prohibited women from voting. At the prospect of another franchise reform bill in 1866, distinguished philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill MP presented the first petition for female suffrage to the House of Commons. In the following year Mill proposed an amendment to the Representation of the People Act (1867) that would replace the word 'man' with the word 'person'. The amendment failed, but Mill's attempt prompted English female groups to form a permanent movement for the pursuit of suffrage.





The example set by English women and frustration with the exclusion of women from the franchise extensions of the late nineteenth century, inspired an organised suffrage campaign in Ireland.

PHASE 1: THE FIRST WAVE

The Irish suffrage movement in the nineteenth century was spearheaded by educated, middle-class Quakers and Protestants. In 1872 Belfast Presbyterian Isabella Tod established the first Irish suffrage society, the North of Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage. An experienced campaigner for women's educational equality and property rights, Tod travelled the country addressing meetings on women's suffrage. Four years later in February 1876, the first meeting of the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association (DWSA) was held in Leinster Hall in Molesworth Street. Founded by Quakers Anna and Thomas Haslam, the DWSA opened its membership to both men and women. In 1896 the association counted only 43 members most of whom were Quakers, but two years later there were branches of the DWSA in Tralee, Sligo, Strokestown and Miltown Malbay. By 1911, membership had grown to 647.

The DWSA sought reform of all legal and social measures that discriminated against women, and was strictly non-militant in its methods. With the parliamentary vote as its ultimate aim, the DWSA began by agitating for the local government vote for women and their right to serve as poor law guardians. Its members lobbied politicians, sent deputations and petitions to Parliament and organised frequent public meetings addressed by prominent English and American suffragist speakers.

Between 1896 and 1898, the Haslam's Association achieved two of its main objectives. A Bill was passed in 1896, which allowed Irish women (fulfilling certain property qualifications) to serve as poor law guardians. Anna Haslam subsequently spearheaded a campaign

to encourage qualified women to stand for election. The result was the election of twelve women as Poor Law Guardians in 1897. Introduced in February of the same year, the Local Government Act enabled qualified women in Ireland to vote for all of the new councils and to stand for election to all except county and borough councils. In recognition of these significant achievements the DWSA changed its name to The Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA). The parliamentary vote, however, remained beyond the reach of the IWSLGA





PHASE 2: THE SECOND WAVE

In the years before the First World War, a new generation of Irish women influenced by movements such as the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin and Labour, grew impatient with the conservative methods of the IWSLGA. Some travelled to London to participate in suffrage demonstrations organised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Formed in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, the WSPU was a militant group whose members engaged in attacks on property, civil disobedience, and heckled speakers at meetings. Their actions were reported on disapprovingly by *Daily Mail*, which gave the name 'Suffragettes' to the new militant group.

Many women in Ireland recognised the need for a separate Irish suffrage movement and in the early decades of the twentieth century numerous small suffrage societies catering for particular regional, religious or political groups sprang up throughout the country. By 1913 there were 15 such groups. The formation of the Irish Women's Franchise League, however, was the most significant development in the Irish suffrage campaign.

Daughter of an Irish M.P., Hanna Sheehy married Frank Skeffington in 1903. Both were members of the IWSLGA and their shared surnames symbolised the equality of their relationship. In 1908 they co-founded Irish Women's Franchise League as a militant suffragist organisation with James and Margret Cousins. Influenced by the English suffragettes, the IWFL was committed to a more aggressive and militant campaign than the earlier groups. The visits by the Pankhursts to speak at crowded public meetings organised by IWFL gained significant publicity for the movement. Its newspaper, *The Irish Citizen* (1912-20) edited by Frank Sheehy Skeffington, became an instrument of propaganda and education.

Although the IWFL described itself as 'militant', its members did not engage in militant activity until after 1912 when the 3rd Home Rule Bill was introduced. Some suffragists were unionist in sympathy and some nationalist, but all were determined that any future Irish parliament would include votes for women.

The only thing, however, upon which John Redmond and unionist leader, Edward Carson, were agreed was their opposition to women's suffrage. In June 1912, frustrated with Redmond's unwillingness to support their cause, the IWFL embarked on a militant campaign which involved breaking windows in Dublin Castle, the GPO and Dublin Castle, and heckling at public meetings. Eight IWFL members were arrested and imprisoned in Mountjoy Gaol.

The WSPU used more violent tactics. When Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, a determined opponent of women's suffrage, visited Dublin in July 1912, two English activists threw a hatchet into his carriage. The same women attempted to burn down the Theatre Royal, the venue of Asquith's speech at a Home Rule meeting. Irish nationalists were horrified. Although they were not involved in the attacks, Irish suffragettes would suffer from the association with militant activity which was seen as anti-home rule, anti-nationalist and unwomanly.

Mary Leigh and Gladys Evans, the two English suffragists responsible for the attacks on Asquith in Dublin, were sentenced to five years in prison and embarked on a hunger strike. Four of the eight IWFL prisoners detained since June, including Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, joined the hunger strike in solidarity with the English activists. Hoping to avoid some of the inevitable negative publicity associated with the controversial measure of forcible feeding, the Irish authorities waited until IWFL strikers completed their shorter sentences before forcibly feeding Leigh



and Evans. Between 1912 and 1914, twenty-seven women were convicted in Ireland for suffrage activity. Although twelve went on hunger strike, none were subject to forcible feeding.

Suffragette militancy in Ulster reached even higher levels of violence when Sir Edward Carson reneged on his promise to include women's suffrage in Unionist Party policy. WSPU activists damaged property, destroyed golf courses and engaged in arson attacks. Non-militant Irish groups completely disassociated themselves from the WSPU's actions in Ireland, and even the IWFL were not supportive.

The outbreak of the First World War ushered in great changes to women's suffrage movement. Some Irish suffrage societies suspended activity and engaged in war relief work while others, such as the IWFL, were strongly anti-war. When the war ended in 1918, Home Rule for Ireland was on the statute books but by then, the Irish political landscape had changed completely as a result of the 1916 Rising. In 1918 the British parliament granted partial suffrage to women over thirty with a property qualification. In December of that year, Sinn Féin candidate, Countess Markievicz, was the first woman elected to the Westminster parliament, although she did not take her seat.

OBSTACLES TO THE IRISH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN

Many people strongly opposed the idea of granting the vote to women. Both men and women spoke against female suffrage and formal anti-suffrage societies were established in Britain and Ireland. Political cartoons in anti-suffragist newspapers often depicted suffragettes as hysterical, mannish and threat to the stability of society.

Members of the medical and legal professions were of the opinion that a women's role in society was as a wife

and mother. The Catholic hierarchy was particularly strong in its opposition, convinced that the female vote would damage the relationship between married couples, putting the future of children, and consequently Political opposition to women's suffrage was based on the fear of how a female vote might destabilise political parties. They also predicted that it would lead to demands for further equality and if women could sit in parliament, they might bring about unwelcome changes. Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin, which rejected any movement with perceived English origins, was critical of the IWFL and its slogan, 'The nationalist movement in Ireland also represented a significant obstacle to the suffrage movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Nationalist feminists faced the question: "Nation first or suffrage first."

From its earliest days, the IWFL was subject to accusations of disloyalty and criticised by those who felt that women's suffrage should not take priority over the nationalist cause. The tension between nationalism and the suffrage movement threatened the stability of suffrage societies. Many women abandoned the IWFL and its ideology of "*Suffrage First – Before All Else*".

The tension increased after 1912, when many nationalists felt female suffrage could obstruct the enactment of Home Rule. Differences in opinion between nationalists and feminists were manifest in the constitution of Cumman na mBan, which prioritised the establishment of an Irish Republic above all else. In its promise of universal suffrage and equal rights and opportunities for all its citizens, the 1916 Proclamation was testimony to close links between nationalist feminists and rebel leaders. United in their protests at the harsh treatment of the rebels in its aftermath the 1916 Rising, suffragists and nationalist feminists renewed their spirit of cooperation.