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The British Government's Disregard Towards Women in Democratisation Process from 1832 to 1918

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Abstract: *This work is concerned with the British Government's disregard towards women in the democratisation process in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries purposely showing the negative impact of the traditional view of women by men in the current political sphere. From the historical perspective, the results have proved that the British Government has developed some unfair behaviour vis-à-vis women, which excluded them from political life for several years. Moreover, after a long struggle between the people and the Government, Parliament voted for the First Reform Act in 1832. This Act gave the right to vote to some men from the Middle Class, but no particular attention was paid to women's cause. Warned of this disqualification, women decided to rise up and claim their rights, but this would not be a simple affair. In the long run of time, men alike women, made up their minds to vigorously attack the Government.*

Key Words: Women, Democratisation Process, Injustice, First World War, 1918 Reform Act

Introduction

Attaining the criteria of democracy that people enjoy today in Britain was a long conflictual battle between the people and the government. That struggle cost much to the British ordinary people who decided to make Parliament more representative by removing aristocratic predominance. But to some extent, it is noticed that women were largely disqualified during that fight for universal suffrage. Indeed, by passing laws to democratise the country, the British Government developed some unfair behaviour towards women, which excluded them from politics for several years, and their enfranchisement did not result from the Government's planning.

Ngatsongo (2022) has spelt out that it was the infirmities of the political system which led the ordinary people to bond together and form associations in order to pressurise the government to give them voting rights, abolish bribery and corruption in elections and recognise universal suffrage. Thanks to this struggle, Parliament

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passed the First Reform Act in 1832; some men were given the right to vote but women's cause was totally disregarded. In this respect, Lance (1977, p.1) wrote, "The passage of the Representation of the People Act of 1832 gave the first legal sanction to the customary exclusion of women from the British electorate during the two previous centuries." In 1867, Parliament passed the Second Reform Act and many men were enfranchised. Although a proposal was presented before Parliament to grant women voting rights, they undoubtedly remained without the vote after the adoption of the Act. Thus, in order to convince the government to stop making the dichotomy between men and women to favour the latter's participation in the public sphere, Lydia Becker (quoted by Holton), one of the founders of the Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage in an article on women's suffrage in 1867, clarified that:

Men and women do not exist in separate spheres, but have a common sphere ‑ the world in which they live ‑ and the cooperation of each in every department of human life is needed for the full development of human faculties in the perfection of the race.

Whatever efforts were made by the feminine gender, no positive answer was given to their claims. In 1884-5, Parliament respectively passed the Third Reform Act and The Redistribution Act, but women still could not vote in parliamentary elections. As a consequence, Mayer (1999, p.75) said:

Although the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884-5 had extended the franchise, Britain was far from being a democratic country. There was still not 'one man, one vote' – let alone 'one person, one vote'. The franchise was limited to men and, furthermore, only to those men who owned or occupied property.

From these illustrations, it can be understood that the British Government was selfish and indifferent to women's political situation. It is generally known to humankind that man and woman are all created equal by God. How could aristocratic political leaders defend men's cause and reject that of women? This treatment let us apprehend that in the past Britain was governed by phallocratic leaders who valued and placed injustice at the centre of everything. Therefore, the aforementioned indications result in "The British Government's Disregard towards Women in Democratisation process from 1832 to 1918." The purpose of this work is thus to show the negative impact of the traditional image of women by men in the current British political sphere.

Several scholars have somewhat expressed their opinions on this topic. Miller (2020) reassesses the place of petitioning ‑ the practices associated with the drafting, signing, and presentation of petitions ‑ within the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British political culture through an examination of the women's suffrage campaign. Tomida's analysis (2019) covers three major areas. Firstly, he explores the emergence and development of the women's suffrage movement in Britain namely the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) known as the Suffragists and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) known as the Suffragettes. Secondly, he assesses the aims, members and major activities of these movements by pointing out their similarities and differences. Thirdly, he attempts to establish a link between the British and the Japanese women's franchise movements and to investigate the former's influence upon the latter.

Vojvodíková (2015) shows what women had to face, that feminism is not a misandry ideology and it has a much deeper meaning. Yun (2012) examines the rise of the women's suffrage movement by drawing on some major theories on the rise of political movements within Political Science to better understand the women's suffrage movement in Britain. Holton (1980) mainly reassesses the early twentieth-century women's suffrage movement, thereby challenging much of the existing historiography of this subject, and he particularly emphasises the constitutional wing of the suffrage movement as represented by the National Union, and its contribution to the success of demand for women's suffrage. Lance (1977) describes and explains the controversial strategy choices of the Women's Social and Political Union meaning the contribution of its strategies to the granting of votes for women in 1918.

Grounded on these existing works, this study seeks to answer the following question: does the traditional image of women by men continue to gain ground in the current British political life? It may be held that in the past women were marginalised and considered as inside beings incapable of thinking and changing things for the better. So, home was the only accurate place where they could work and do better. With the

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passing of time, the government seemingly tried to grant them emancipation. Unfortunately, this traditional image of women is still influencing the minds of the current political leaders and excludes parity within the United Kingdom's Parliament. To achieve its objective, this work is made possible with the help of the historical perspective by drawing a particular emphasis on the Traditional Image of Women and its Impact Today and Women's Fight for their Rights.

The Traditional Image of Women and its Impact Today

The aim of this section is to assess the status of women before they could be accepted in the public sphere and the impact of their ill-treatment in the current British democracy. In doing so, it is evident that women lived as prisoners before they could seize the opportunity to rise up and claim their rights to change the status quo of their social, economic and political situation. They enjoyed no rights and were only destined for domestic service. The divisions between the public sphere (masculine roles) and private sphere (feminine roles) were deeply intensified in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Digby (1992, p.199) said:

It was during the transitional period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that, according to Catherine Hill, 'gender divisions were reworked' and 'men placed firmly in the newly defined public world of business, commerce, and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family.

But these dichotomies dated back earlier to history than these centuries as Digby (1992, p.195) put it, "These contrasts were in some respects ancient ones: the political dimension of public masculine persons and private female persons going back at least to Aristotle."

In addition, among people who devoted themselves to denying women's rights, there was Queen Victoria. In other words, it means that she was really indifferent to women's cause. Tomida (2019, p.78) says:

(…) Queen Victoria had fixed ideas of gender roles and vehemently opposed 'women's rights'. When she came to the British throne in 1837, women were still deprived of political, legal, economic and marital rights. Generally speaking, women were regarded as inferior creatures, and most of them had few opportunities for independent advancement. Therefore, most women aspired to marriage. Their role in life was that of a wife and mother, and their main function was to perpetuate the race.

Broadly speaking, it is really amazing because as a female monarch women expected improvements in their living and working conditions, but the queen showed herself as an actual antifeminist by denying the latter's rights. In the same way, Queen Victoria, quoted by Fernández (2016, p.4), wrote: "Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, with totally different duties and vocations." Therefore, considering this wickedness towards women, it can be generally agreed that the latter were similar to animals. Tomida (2019, p.79) states that on March 18th 1853 a parliamentary report was published in The Times and gave some indication of women's extremely low legal status in the Victorian period:

During a debate in the House of Commons, Mr Fitzroy stated that under English law a woman was worth less than poodle dogs or a Skye terrier. His conclusion came from a comparison of punishments imposed by the courts. It reported that 'any man may, at his pleasure, kick, bruise, beat, knockdown, and stamp upon' a woman and the fine was a quarter of that for stealing a dog. Worse still, if the fine was unpaid, the crime of viciously beating a woman would bring a two-month prison sentence with hard labour, whereas the theft of a dog brought a much harsher sentence of six months in prison with hard labour. He went on to suggest that women should be classified as animals so that they could be better protected under the Cruelty to Animals Act.

Moreover, it is of great importance at this level to point out the factors which were set by men to exclude women from politics. In effect, it is clear that female participation was not appreciated in politics due to some traditional beliefs maintained by men such as (https://www.bbc.co.uk, accessed on February 15, 2022):

- women were seen as physically, mentally, emotionally and morally inferior to men
- it was felt that women could not be trusted to vote rationally
- a woman's sphere of influence was seen to be the home and raising children
- public life, including politics was seen to belong to the male sphere of influence

- it was believed that women involved in politics would neglect their responsibilities at home
- it was assumed that women did not need the vote – their husbands took that responsibility
- some women even believed that females were not capable of understanding politics

In the same way, this view of women by men was explicitly appreciated by a seventeenth–century Englishman who, quoted by Mayoke (2002, p.55), asserted:

Man and wife are one person but understand in what manner. When a small brooke or little river incorpreteth with Rhodanus, Humber or the Thames, the poor rivulet looseth its name, it is carried and recarried with the new associate, it beareth no sway, it possesseth nothing during coverture. A woman as soon as is married, is called covert, in Latin Nupta, that is veiled, as it were clouded and overshadowed, she hath lost her streame… To a married woman her newself is her superior, her companion, her master.

This meant that a married woman (or spinster) did not have the right to own properties and could not work because her husband did. Her freedom resided in her obedience to her husband. She was strictly prohibited from getting divorced, to get educated and to vote. So, it is also in this light that Vojvodíková (2015, p.7) notes:

(…) in general if a woman was not aristocratic, she had a very little control of the direction her life would lead and she had no power. Her only role was to be a wife, mother and good housewife, peasant or, if in convent, a nun. Other working opportunity was a servant or a midwife but these positions were mainly for unmarried women. The ordinary married woman had to manage household, childbearing, taking care of husband and she was not allowed to do any other activity which would bring pleasure.

As a result, all these discriminatory aspects at the time led many people today to declare that Britain is not a truly democratic country. The traditional view of women by traditional leaders is still shaping the minds of British modern political leaders. That is why there is no full participation of women in politics. Therefore, in the British Parliament, we notice that the percentage of women is lower than that of men. Uberoi and Mansfield (2023, p.5) said, "In both politics and public life in the UK, women have historically been underrepresented. In recent years, their proportion has increased, although in most cases men remain overrepresented, especially in more senior positions."

It is clear that even if women were given the right to vote in parliamentary elections, today they have fewer representatives in Parliament than men. They (2023, p.8) added, "As of March 2023, 225 MPs are women, the highest number in history. This represents 35% of all MPs, the same number as in March 2022." This lack of parity is due to the fact that men are still considering women as they did in former times. It is no wonder that the social thinker R.H. Tawney, quoted by Wright (2002, pp.24-25), pinpoints that the British had accepted democracy

as a convenience, like an improved system of telephones; she did not dedicate herself to it as the expression of a moral idea of comradeship and equality, the avowal of which would leave nothing the same. She changed her political garments, but not her heart. She carried into the democratic area, not only the institutions but the social habits and mentality of the oldest and toughest plutocracy in the world (…)

Presently, how can women gain equal representation in Parliament? An attempt to answer this question is given in the conclusion of this work.

British Women's Fight for Their Rights

This section is dedicated to demonstrating how women hopefully and technically decided to stand up and fight for their emancipation. In effect, until the beginning of the 19th century, female improvements were not welcome. They continued to suffer and be considered as inferior. That is why Vojvodíková (2015, p.20) concurs:

The beginning of the 19th century was still harsh in attitude towards female sex. Any women's movement before 1850 was scattered and disjointed, basically non-existent. Divorce, higher education, the possibility of working, right to own property or to vote were women's ambitions still considered taboo. For women education is a waste of time, responsibility would seize them and work would make them ill. (…) Being a woman was still a very hard position to be in. Married or unmarried, she was still a subordinate human being with almost no part in leading her life. It is true that it was possible to choose a husband, to marry from love but if the

relationship did not end [sic] happily, the divorce would deprive her of any possession, dignity and social position. Unmarried women were also in an unenviable situation.

Considered prisoners, deprived of freedom all the time, women then decided to move forward with their movements unprecedentedly in order to feel free and improve their conditions in every sphere of life in the society of their own. By the way, Vojvodíková (2015, p.21) added:

It was the second half of the 19th century when organized campaigns, clubs and movements for women's rights emerged in order to improve the female condition in terms of education, opportunities to work outside their households, reform in laws affecting married women and, for the first time, for the right to vote.

Indeed, Mason (2015, p.134) witnesses that in the mid-1860s and in 1868 many societies were born to found the National Society for Women's Suffrage and fifty-six of them in 1914 with 300,000 members in total. Due to the misunderstanding about the aims to lead the movement, it was disunited and split. On the one hand, some members and societies wanted only to seek votes for women and others wanted to seek this and other causes such as women's property rights on the other hand. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were formally left out of parliamentary elections, but they could somewhat vote in other spheres. Meanwhile, Parliament voted on some legislation which affected the status of women. In this way, Evans (2014, pp.77-78) worded:

Women ratepayers could vote for poor law guardians under the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 permitted women ratepayers to vote on the same terms as men, though this was restricted to unmarried women three years later (…) The County Councils Act of 1888 (…) also gave women householders the vote. The Parish and Rural District Councils Act of 1894 permitted them both to vote and to stand as candidates.

Moreover, to put forward women's cause Lance (1977, p.2) said, "On October 13, 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union [W.S.P.U.]." Mason (2015, pp.135-136) explains that the movement was mainly ruled by Emmeline herself, her daughters, other members of her family and her friends. During the life of the WSPU and many other movements campaigning for women's suffrage, there were several splits. Those who were allowed to join the movement were only women. Emmeline, Christabel (Emmeline's daughter) and the WSPU succeeded in attracting the attention of the middle-class and upper-class women. The most important example was Constance from the Conservative Party. In the beginning, the movement put emphasis on the use of legal and peaceful means. Nevertheless, in 1905 its leaders decided to use militant tactics to break the law. Firstly, it was made in a soft way and over time more purposefully and sometimes violently. At an early stage, the Daily Mail named its members 'suffragettes'.

However, the immaturity of the movement led to weakness. The suffragettes did not succeed in reaching their objective because Whitfield (2001, p.162) stated, "The leadership style of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst was autocratic and alienated many of the organisation's members. The WSPU had no constitution, no annual meetings and no accounts." In the meantime, to influence negatively the women's struggle, in 1905 The Senior Physician at Bethlem Royal Hospital, T.B Hyslop, quoted by Digby (1992, p.197), stated:

The removal of woman from her natural sphere of domesticity to that of mental labour not only renders her less fit to maintain the virility of the race, but it renders her prone to degenerate, and initiate a downward tendency which gathers impetus in her progeny… The departure of women from her natural sphere to an artificial one involves a brain struggle which is deleterious to the virility of the race… it has very direct bearings upon the increase of nervous instability. In fact, the higher women strive to hold the torch of intellect, the dimmer the rays of light for the vision of their progeny.

In addition, from Evans' viewpoint (2014, p.75), the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) which was formed in 1897, grew rapidly after 1903 in response to the WSPU. By 1914, it had more than 50,000 members. Their struggle was mainly based on moral force which meant legal and peaceful or non-violent means of persuasion. Whitfield (2001, pp.148-149) noted that it was run by Millicent Fawcett and made up of 16 separate suffrage groups linked together in a federal structure. Some groups were still under the control of middle-class women and others were dominated by radicals who relied on working-class women. Members of this movement

were called 'suffragists'. In seeking to reach their central objective (vote for women), radical suffragists demanded 'womanhood suffrage'. They insisted on full adult suffrage because they realised that many men were still not given the right to vote.

In short, these movements declaimed in many different ways for women's cause, but all their efforts resulted in failure. Firstly, because they did not share the same ideas in the groups (discord) and secondly due to the government's inattention to their cause. So, until this stage women were still voting. Digby (1992, 202) stated:

(…) Octavia Hill thought that education, and also property rights for women, were reasonable objectives, significantly she was not in favour of female suffrage. As a philanthropist, who was dependent on women workers to implement her distinctive ideals of housing management, she considered that women in Parliament would be lost to this kind of good work. It would, she considered, be 'fatal… for women to be drawn in the political arena.

The year 1914 was marked by the outbreak of the First World War. This war ended in 1918. During this period the whole suffrage movement silenced and even suspended some of their activities because of the instability that prevailed in the country. Røstvik and Sutherland (2015, p.2) stated:

The Government released suffragette prisoners soon after the declaration of war in August 1914 and their leader, Mrs Pankhurst, now sympathetic to the Government's stance on the war, ordered that all militant suffragette activity cease. The non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) also agreed to suspend their campaigning and shift their energies into relief work, but the possibility of a general election dominated the domestic politics of 1915-1918 and there was a clear opportunity for women to be included in the franchise.

At the end of the war, all women over the age of 30 were rewarded with the right to vote provided that they fulfilled some conditions. Thus, Mason (2015, 139) affirms:

The Speaker's Conference led on to the Representation of the People Act, which received Royal Assent on 6 February 1918. (…) The Act followed the recommendations of the conference, making the eligible age 30 rather than 35. Women aged 30 or over were given the vote if they were either entitled to be entered on the Local Government Register or married to a man who was entitled to be entered on it, a property owner, or a graduate voting in a university constituency.

Why did women begin to vote in parliamentary elections in 1918? As said above, (https://www.bbc.co.uk, accessed on February 15, 2022) at the start of the war both the suffragettes and suffragists agreed to pause their campaign for the enfranchisement and get involved in the war effort. Emmeline Pankhurst urged the WSPU members to forget first their struggle in order to emphasise the war effort. She begged other women to work in factories in the place of men who were fighting overseas. As much support was needed, the government decided to release all WSPU prisoners who had been arrested due to protests. Indeed, women were used heavily in war recruitment campaigns to try to galvanise men. They were drawn on posters with slogans such as 'Women of Britain say go' to encourage men who were unable to leave their families and go to fight. They also contributed to the war through the Women's Land Army, Munitionettes, Voluntary Aid Detachment and the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. We are going now to explain these associations with possible details respectively.

Firstly, in 1917 it was estimated that in Britain there was no longer much food and it left only for about three weeks. So, the Women's Land Army as its name indicates was born to energise women to till the land, grow crops and help feed the country. Willingly 23,000 women accepted to join the WLA and they played a prevalent role in struggling against starvation.

Secondly, there was a necessity for large weapon production to arm soldiers fighting in France and Belgium. However, there was no one in factories because men went to fight. In this respect, women were obliged to work in armament factories. By the end of the war, there were around one million women who were working in factories and these women became known as the munitionettes. The work they did was risky. There were risks of explosions and fires from the unsafe materials being used to make weapons. Many of the chemicals used to create these arms were toxic. TNT (trinitrotoluence) usually yellowed people's skin and women who worked in these factories were nicknamed 'canary girls'.

Thirdly, the Voluntary Aid Detachment was founded in 1909 and included volunteer nurses

who took care of injured soldiers in hospitals in the United Kingdom and on the front line. It had 74,000 volunteers in late 1914 who worked to look after injured soldiers, and women formed two-thirds of them.

Fourthly and lastly, women were not allowed to fight together with men on the front line in the First World War. They could exercise civic roles by providing for example administrative support for soldiers on the front line until the war ended. Women fulfilled roles such as sorting the post, administration, catering and mechanics. In 1917, this work was formally known as the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. As a whole, it had about 57,000 women at its disposal.

We understand through these arguments that women were enfranchised to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time thanks to their effort in wartime to support men who were fighting on the front line. To sustain this view, Sylvia Pankhurst, quoted by Mayer (1999, p.102), said:

Undoubtedly the large part taken by women during the War in all branches of social service had proved a tremendous argument for their enfranchisement. Yet the memory of the old militancy, and the certainty of its recurrence if the claims of women were set aside, was a much stronger factor in overcoming the reluctance of those who would again have postponed the settlement (…)

We have to ask ourselves the following question: what would be women's political situation if the First World War did not occur? If some historians have argued that the government was already planning to give women the right to vote before the war, why did not they do it during the passing of the three first Parliamentary Acts? It is certain that women would have continued to be deprived of voting rights even today.

Conclusion

This work was premised on casting light on the British Government's Disregard towards Women in the Democratisation Process from 1832 to 1918. In the foregoing lines, the purpose was to show how the traditional image of women by men still affects negatively the current British political life. The discussion has led us to detect that formerly women were unpityingly marginalised and considered as inferior beings incapable of bringing change to society. It was in fact maintained that their perfect place to work was home where they could achieve their tasks immaculately as it was their role by nature. This perception prevented them from intervening in the public sphere for a long period of time. Indeed, they had to rise up and claim their rights until they were given the right to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time in 1918 after completing a noble and patriotic mission during the First World War. Despite their recognition in the public sphere, they are still hailed as inferior to men because misogynist views of the past are always present in the minds of today's political leaders. As it is a psychological problem, this work states that persuasion is the unique means whereby this stereotype can be abandoned.

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