

How did the women's rights movement shape modern Britain?

How did the women's rights movement develop?

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives:

- To create a shared environment of open inquiry
- To reflect on oral history as a method of historical enquiry
- To understand how the role of women in British society transformed throughout twentieth century
- To reflect on the motivating factors of the second wave feminist movement

Introduction

A 2023 study by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London found that people in Britain are increasingly afraid of speaking out for women's rights, with younger generations being almost twice as fearful as older generations. Yet Britain has long been a centre of intense activism in favour of women's rights, from the suffrage movement to the women's liberation movement, and nearly half of all young people surveyed by King's College London identified themselves as feminists.

This lesson aims to present a throughline of women's activism in twentieth century Britain. It is intended to be used as the first lesson in a scheme of work looking at the impact of the women's rights movement on twentieth century Britain. This lesson encourages students to engage with challenging histories, to evaluate and reflect on oral histories as a source of knowledge, and to understand the sociopolitical context from which the women's rights movement of the 1970s emerged.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested on the basis of a one-hour lesson and may need adapting based on circumstances.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

Resources:

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Timeline and terminology worksheet - one per student
- Eye to eye handout (Slide 13) – one per student

Lesson Plan**Challenging Histories and a shared space for learning (5 minutes)**

Before the lesson begins, it is important to set the foundations for the learning process ahead, including being aware of the potential challenges of discussing elements of British history. Explain that British history can be contentious and cause emotional reactions. Exploring the past can mean we encounter voices, ideas, and interpretations that we may disagree with or even find offensive. It is important to acknowledge this and feel able to express this in an appropriate way. Encourage students to be open to understand different perspectives, even if they may not agree with them.

Acknowledge and explain that how we look at the past depends on where we are in the present. Students might have knowledge, ideas, feelings, experiences, heritage related to a given historical person, context, or event which inform or steer their judgements. To ensure a classroom in which historical study can be open and honest invite students to agree to the following guiding principles for historical learning (Slide 1):

- To be conscious that we each have a unique perspective based on our own circumstances, but that nobody has more or less importance in this class.
- To let the facts inform you and lead your learning, rather than finding facts to support a prior viewpoint.
- Avoid the use terms like ‘we’ to refer to historical figures, peoples – as historians it is necessary to be impartial so the language used is important.

- i.e. refer to 'the British' rather than 'we'. This helps to separate ourselves from the study and avoids unintentional othering or subconscious bias.
- Accept that interpretations and feelings about what we study can and will differ. This is ok!
- Discussion should be based on the facts. Use evidence to support your points to avoid making unfair or inaccurate assertions.

It is also important that students show respect and acceptance of one another in the classroom in order for them to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas. To create a space of shared learning in which each member of the class is valued, invite students to agree to the ground rules outlined on Slide 2).

The aim is to encourage openness and create space for students to share their ideas and personal experiences, but without obligation and in an environment that comfortable, supportive and non-judgemental.

Starter (5 minutes)

Pose the following question to students (Slide 3): Are boys and girls equal in Britain today? Ask students to explain the rationale behind their answer and cite evidence. Students may disagree on their answers but should disagree respectfully: remind them of the guiding principles from Slides 1 and 2.

Now, provide students with a series of statistical information about how the status of women in Britain has changed in the last seventy years (Slide 4). Ask students: Does this change your answer? If so, how? How men and women become more equal over time? Have we reached full equality? Encourage students to discuss these questions further as a class.

Students should be able to locate themselves in the broader story of gender equality over time in Britain – a transformation which is not yet complete.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Introduce students to the enquiry question for the unit (Slide 5): How did the women's rights movement shape modern Britain? Further introduce students to the enquiry question for this lesson: How did the women's rights movement develop?

Explain that in the coming lessons the class will be examining how gender roles and opportunities in postwar Britain changed because of the women's rights movement. Our contemporary world continues to be shaped by their philosophies and activism.

Activity: Terminology + Timeline worksheet (10 minutes)

Circulate one copy per student of the Terminology & Timeline worksheet (2 pages - see additional resources). Explain to students that we will be covering several decades of history throughout this unit and that we will be using some terms that they may be unfamiliar with (Slide 6).

In groups of 4-5, ask students to spend 4 minutes reviewing the terminology and timeline worksheet together, paying particular attention to terms and events which are currently unfamiliar to them. After reviewing, they should take 2-3 minutes to answer the worksheet questions as the bottom of the second page. Bring the class back together and call on groups to share out their answers to each of the worksheet questions.

Explain that students should reference this worksheet throughout the unit whenever they come across an event or a term which might be unfamiliar to them.

Women's activism and oral history (14 minutes)

Ask students what they already know or remember about the women's suffrage movement (Slide 7). Call on individual students to share out their responses.

Before playing the video, ask students to keep the reflection question in mind: What arguments does Emmeline Pankhurst make in favour of militant activism in her speech? Then play the [speech by Emmeline Pankhurst](#).

Next, ask students to discuss the question with their partner (Slide 8): What arguments does Emmeline Pankhurst make in favour of militant activism in her speech? After two minutes of paired discussion, call on students to share their reflections.

Review a basic historical overview of the women's suffrage movement (Slide 9). Students should understand the suffragists and suffragettes used a wide variety of methods to achieve their political goals. Ask students to independently reflect: How did women's lives change by gaining suffrage?

Next, ask students what they know about women's contributions to the WWII war effort (Slide 10). Before playing the video, ask students to keep the reflection questions in mind: What struggles does Mona describe dealing with during her wartime service? Then play the [oral history of Mona McLeod](#).

Ask students to reflect with a partner (Slide 11): What struggles does Mona describe dealing with during her wartime service? After two minutes of paired discussion, call on students to share their reflections.

Review the ways and means through which women contributed to the World War II war effort (Slide 12). Students should understand that women were permitted to undertake more 'masculine' jobs as part of the war effort and proved themselves as equally capable in these roles. Ask students to independently reflect: **How did the role of women in British society change during World War II?**

Activity: Eye to Eye (14 minutes)

Provide students with the 'Eye to Eye' handout (Slide 13).

Move to Slide 14 and explain to students that they are going to watch the first few minutes of a film made by the BBC in 1958 to shed light on a societal issue of the time.

Invite students to listen and watch the film, keeping in mind the following questions on their handout:

- What is the societal issue this documentary is investigating?
- How do the husbands spend their time, and what do they think about?
- How do the wives spend their time, and what do they think about?
- At the conclusion of the clip, Mr. Findlater says the saying goes: "Men must _____ and women must _____."

Play the video using the external link on Slide 15. Play the first 5:20 of the film - until Mr. Findlater says "men must work and women must weep." Then, give students another thirty seconds to complete their handout notes.

Invite students to compare their notes and discuss the key questions in small groups for three minutes.

Bring the small group discussion to a close and share the sample notes as an exemplar (Slide 16). Invite students to share with the class any different or further notes they might have made.

Encourage students to discuss their interpretation of Mr. Findlater's phrase and explain their reasoning for what it means. Then, bring the large group discussion to a close.

Present students with an overview of gender roles in 1950s. Men and women existed in different spheres. Men entered the workforce, with very little involvement in childcare or family life, while women were responsible for the household with very few opportunities to participate in further education or work.

Ask students to reflect: How were these different spheres constricting? Why did people begin to protest them?

Summary: How did the women's rights movement develop in twentieth century Britain? (10 minutes)

Introduce students to the subject of the next lessons: the Women's Liberation Movement (Slide 18). Explain that in 1970, the first National Women's Liberation Conference was held at Ruskin College, Oxford. Attendees there settled on four demands for their movement: Equal pay, Equal educational and job opportunities, Free contraception and abortion on demand, Free 24-hour nurseries. These demands would shape the movement which followed.

Conclude with a large group discussion (Slide 19). Ask students to reflect: How did the activism of British women earlier in the twentieth century eventually lead to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s? Ask them to justify their response with evidence from the lesson. Students can also reference their Timeline Worksheet if needed.

Students should be able to broadly trace the impact of one generation of activism to the next generation, culminating in the Women's Liberation Movement. Remind students that the activism of this movement is still ongoing today.