

## Fighting for Women's

Until the last century women did not have the same rights as men in the western world. For example, they could not vote or go to school. They were always subject to a male figure of the family (their fathers, brothers or some other male relative) and had to accept their choices. Their possessions usually belonged to their husbands. Sometimes they were not free to work and to choose their religion.

In ancient Rome a wife was her husband's property and she could not do anything according to her own wishes. Between 610 and 661, thanks to reforms that gave women some rights regarding inheritance, marriage and divorce, the status of women improved in Islam, but it was only centuries later that women were given similar legal status in other cultures, because a patriarchal order was believed to be the most natural.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more and more women started to think that this was not fair and wanted change. In 1903 British women from all social classes (called suffragettes by the newspapers) started a political group called 'The Women's Social and Political Union'. Their leader was Emmeline Pankhurst and they fought for 'Women's rights' (the right of women to be equal to men) and the right to vote (their nickname came from the word 'suffrage', which means 'the right to vote').

In the beginning their methods were peaceful. They wrote letters and sent petitions to Parliament, but there were not successful, so they started using other methods: they chained themselves to fences, organised attacks on shops and art galleries and set fire to letter boxes. For this reason many of them were arrested between 1908 and 1913. While in prison,



they considered themselves political prisoners and went on hunger strikes.

At the beginning of World War I, they stopped doing this and began to do some jobs that only men had done before. As a consequence, British women (but only rich, married women over 30 years of age) were allowed to vote in political elections for the first time in 1918. It was not until 1928 that all women were allowed to vote.

In the 1960s this movement was called 'feminism' and women demanded the same pay as men, equal rights in law and the freedom to plan their families. The first British Sex Discrimination Act, an Equal Pay Act and an Equal Opportunities Commission came into force in 1975 and after that the UK Government persuaded other EEC countries to guarantee that discrimination laws would be abolished in the European Community.

Today women in many countries still continue to campaign for the same rights as men.

