

Rethinking the History of the English Feminism: The Suffragists' Neutral Position on Education reform and the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts: 1850-1886

إعادة النظر في تاريخ النسوية الإنجليزية: الموقف المحايد لدعاة حق الاقتراع من إصلاح التعليم وإلغاء قوانين الأمراض المعدية (1850-1886)

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Abstract:

This study aims to assert that the women's suffrage movement in nineteenth-century Britain does not merit the scholarly attention it received from historians of the post-1850 feminist movement. While it is true that the suffrage advocates made much effort to enfranchise women, they were, however, entirely absent from the wider feminist campaigns for girls' education and the reform of laws on prostitution. So, it might be inferred that the 'Woman Question' was not solely confined to the struggle for gaining women the right to vote, but it spoke fundamental questions concerning women's right to education and the rejection of the cultural and historical assumptions about sexuality which combined to limit working-class prostitutes' human rights.

keywords: feminism, rethinking, the suffrage narrative, education reform, prostitution.

ملخص:

تسعى هذه الدراسة للتأكيد على أنّ حركة حق المرأة في التصويت في بريطانيا في القرن التاسع عشر لا تستحق ذلك الاهتمام الأكاديمي الذي تلقته من قبل مؤرخي الحركة النسوية بعد عام 1850. في حين أنّه من الصحيح أنّ المدافعين عن حقّ الاقتراع بذلوا جهودًا كبيرة لمنح النساء حقّ التصويت، إلا أنّهم كانوا غائبين تمامًا عن الحملات النسوية الأوسع المتعلقة بتعليم الفتيات وإصلاح القوانين الخاصة بالبعثاء. وبالتالي، فالنتيجة التي يمكن استخلاصها أنّ "قضية المرأة" لا تقتصر فقط على النضال من أجل تأمين حق

الانتخاب للنساء، بل تتناول قضايا جوهرية تتعلق بحق المرأة في التعليم ورفض الافتراضات الثقافية والتاريخية حول الجنس التي كانت سببا في تقييد حقوق البغايا من الطبقة العاملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية، إعادة النظر، سرد الاقتراع، إصلاح التعليم، الدعارة.

1. Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, a considerable number of women's reform organisations were proliferating across the United Kingdom, including the Chartist movement, the Owenite movement, organised Freethought, and in many of these, the suffragists played an actively prominent role. With the establishment of the women's suffrage movement in the 1860s, women from all classes of English society were encouraged to assert their individual rights as independent citizens. In spite of the fact that the effort to secure suffrage for women lasted some one hundred years, some scholars argued that the suffrage movement was one of the most significant and wide-ranging moments of democratic transition in all of British history. For example, scholar Ray Strachey traced carefully women's struggle for personal, legal, political and social liberties from the late eighteenth century until after the First World War. Part of his work focuses on the role that feminist activists played in the suffrage campaigns, drawing remarkable portraits of the personalities involved such as Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Millicent Fawcett, and Josephine Butler. Strachey believed that these suffragists helped not only to spread ideas on women's suffrage but also to provide openings for the most authentic expression of women's political action and the historically specific movement of the 1860s and 1900s (Strachey, 1969). Similarly, Barbara Caine (1982) has maintained that the history of women's suffrage was telling irony of democratic transition because it revealed that the vote provided full citizenship and access to employment and educational opportunities to all British women (pp. 573-544). While scholar Sophia Van Wingerden (1999) attempted to cover all the petitions presented by the suffragists to the House of Commons, and estimated them at about 1.000, containing over three million signatures. During a period of thirty years, she concluded, more than 1300 public meetings were held despite the fact that women attending meetings were thought to be most terrible and dangerous (p. 25).

Nevertheless, the untold truth is that the women's suffrage movement did not embrace the main issues that nineteenth-century feminists were concerned about. Although the women's suffrage movement has received a serious historical attention from scholars of the post-1850 feminist movement, there were facets to the movement that remained unexplored. In fact, scholars have always tended to focus upon the uses of the franchise as integral to establishing the legitimacy of political equality between the sexes. But they appear to have ignored the fact that the suffragists were not involved in the campaigns for girls' education and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (C.D. Acts).

2. The Difference between Suffragism and Feminism

To begin with, the women's suffrage movement in Britain started as part of its wider protest for franchise reform around the first Reform Bill of 1866, when leading suffragist John Stuart Mill introduced a constitutional amendment to eliminate any difference on 'the basis of sex' (Rendall, 1987, p. 119). In 1867, Lydia Becker formed the National Society for Women's Suffrage Committee in London. It was the first organised suffrage movement based on the single issue of suffrage. The organisation campaigned for women's right to vote through peaceful and legal means, by introducing Parliamentary Bills and holding meetings to explain and promote their aims.

Petitioning was a major tactic adopted by the suffragists to grant women the right to vote. A number of petitions were presented to the House of Commons aiming to enfranchise women but were all defeated. The first petition was drafted by Mary Smith from Stanmore in Yorkshire in 1832. Mary Smith's petition was a direct objection to the old parliamentary system of representation, in which she stated that she paid taxes and followed the same rules of the law as men but she was not assigned the right to vote (Crawford, 1999, p. 41). In retrospect, the Commons defeated Smith's petition and thus formalizing the exclusion of women from the franchise.

On 7 June 1866, John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett presented the first ladies' petition to the House of Commons in order to extend the franchise to all householders (Hammel, 2019, p. 284). On 20 May 1867, Mill sought to amend the Second Reform bill to replace the word 'man' with 'person'. Nevertheless, Mill's amendment was opposed by Sir Edward Kent Karlake, the Conservative MP for

Colchester, who stated that he did not meet women who wanted to take an active role in public and political affairs other than their roles as mothers and wives.

Arguably, the history of these efforts presented the curious problem of no progress being made in the British Parliament. In spite of the fact that the question of the franchise was kept before the commons year by year, with many bills introduced, and with some of them having heavy majorities on second reading, women were still denied the right to vote throughout the nineteenth century.

Some historians have suggested that the suffragists' efforts never coalesced into a coherent philosophy of a feminist movement. Following this line of thought, scholar Frank Ransom Strong (1930) asserted that the leaders of the suffrage movement had not focused on the unique attributes of communicative discourse that good faith political deliberation could promote conditions fostering equality of respect between the sexes. (p. 43)

Feminist demands and ideas were constructed in a variety of terms such as 'the woman question,' 'women's emancipation,' 'women's empowerment, 'women's rights', 'and 'gender equality'. But terms such as 'women's suffrage,' 'voting,' 'ballot,' and 'franchise' reflected just one aspect of the fundamental aims of the mainstream feminist movement.

Although women were confined to the domestic sphere and were denied from holding elective office in Parliament throughout most of Western history, there was evidence of early feminist protest against such circumscribed status. Historian Karen Offen (2000) has used the expression 'feminist revolution' to demonstrate the extent to which British feminists were dissatisfied with the traditional male-determined roles assigned to women. These feminists, she contended, sought to awaken other women to their potential for self-advancement and to raise their level of aspirations (p. 20).

In the 1830s and 40s, for example, the Owenite movement was built around religious controversy and its opposition to sexual difference and the prevailing marriage system. Its founder, Robert Owen entirely rejected sexual repression for either men or women, believed equality and mutual cooperation, not submission or power, to be necessary to humanity's progress, and argued that all sexual tastes could be met in the Owenite community where the right mix of

human types prevailed. Scholar Barbara Taylor (1983) stated that Owen and his successors led to the development of a more structured and communal society, where men and women could meet as equal citizens and not as members of different social classes (pp. 21-46).

In *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914*, Laura Schwartz (2012) has examined the history of organised Freethought in Britain and the contributions of the more radical Freethinking feminists to the women's rights movement, from the 1830s through to *la fin de siècle*. In her opinion, the feminist struggle revolved around the rejection of all sexual and religious constraints imposed upon women.

For these women, the rejection of their former religion encouraged and shaped support for women's rights... Their commitment to moral autonomy, free speech and the democratic dissemination of knowledge, their rejection of God-given notions of sexual differences and their critique of the Christian institution of marriage, provided powerful intellectual tools with which to challenge religious attitudes to womanhood. (p. 3)

By contrast to the petitioning tactic adopted by the suffragists, the more radical Owenites and Freethinking feminists made systematic and frequently radical attacks on the prevailing-patriarchal system of gender, especially the Christian institution of marriage, which automatically reinforced women's subordinate position in society. These feminists fervently believed that fighting the roots of women's oppression would help to socially liberate women.

Recently, Susan Kingsley Kent (1987) offered a set of arguments to rescue the post-1850 Women's Movement from the throes of the suffrage narrative in which it is currently ensconced. While examining the speeches and writings of dominant feminist activists, Kent asserted that the leaders of the British women's rights movement viewed themselves as engaged in a struggle to deliver deeper change in favour of women by removing the obstacles that produced strong gender inequalities in society at large. Kent argued that historians who viewed the women's rights movement as devoted solely to gaining the right to vote were meant to misunderstand its

goals. Although she did not ignore the historical value of the suffrage movement in her book, Kent concluded that feminism powerfully reflected a history of different struggles and that the post-1850 feminist movement was founded to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, and to achieve full gender equality in law and in practice. (p. 17)

It is important to say that the establishment of the women's suffrage movement was a significant moment in the history of Victorian feminism, but it did not embrace all the aspects of women's emancipation. Feminism usually refers to a series of social movements and political campaigns, which aimed to make radical improvements in education, marriage rights, and female suffrage. On the other hand, the history of suffragism reflected an activist political struggle to enfranchise women, which apparently was not possible due to the dominant cultural and religious constraints.

3. The Suffragists' Neutral Position on Education Reform

In spite of the fact that the reform of girls' education was particularly viewed as an integral part of a general set of human rights to which women were entitled on the basis of their humanity, the issue was never raised within the suffragists' societies.

Broadly speaking, the reform of girls' education in England began soon after the establishment of Queen's College and Bedford College in London. The Queen's College was originally founded in 1848. It offered sufficient training to governesses to be qualified for teaching the girls at home. As well as the churches were concerned, some Anglican male educators from King's College in London provided the monetary support to the Queen's College in its early beginnings. In 1849, Mrs. Elizabeth Reid founded Bedford College that was a women-only higher education institution. It aimed to provide a liberal and non-sectarian education for female students, something no other institution in the United Kingdom offered at the time. These two educational establishments helped train some of the early female educators including Miss Buss, founder of North London Collegiate School (NLCS) (Purvis, 1991, pp. 73-75).

Feminist activists from diverse backgrounds were highly involved in the wider campaigns for girls' education, while the suffrage advocates maintained a neutral position. Scholar Jordan Ellen (1991) has analyzed the writings and speeches of almost all the nineteenth-

century commentators on the education of girls and found that among the advocates of girls' education reform were proto-feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Emily Davies, comparative conservatives like Hannah More and Dorothea Beale, those defined by Sara Delamont as separatists who wished to develop a specifically female curriculum and academic structure, and those she called uncompromising who wanted to make the girls' curriculum identical with the boys. (pp. 440-442)

In the same vein, Shelia Fletcher has associated progress on girls' education with a number of factors that she referred to as 'the agents'. As such, the bureaucrats, the unsung men of government, who played a central role in the campaign for secondary schooling for British girls in the 1860s and 70s; the moral and religious underpinnings put forward by middle-class evangelicals and the more pious churchmen; and the utilitarians and positivists who underlined the importance of education in ensuring girls' and women's ability to claim other rights and achieve status in society (Prentice, 1982, p. 215).

It is also important to note that the dominant women's suffrage organisations had never discussed the question of girls' education in their councils, meetings, and their various political branches. Between 1870 and 1876, for instance, the women's suffrage societies organised several meetings to discuss the question of suffrage but nothing on education. As historian Elizabeth Crawford has argued, the suffrage leaders were primarily interested to obtain the parliamentary franchise for widows and spinsters on the same conditions as those on which it is granted to men (Simikin, 1997).

More interestingly, some of the available research projects produced on the history of voting rarely contained information about how the women's suffrage movement affected girls' education. One example is Elizabeth Crawford's *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (2003), which effectively surveyed the geographical dimension of the women's suffrage movement in ten regions of England, together with Wales, Scotland and Ireland but nothing on education. This book gave a unique historical fact concerning the rapid growth and spread of the women's suffrage campaigns in these countries throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century (p. 2).

Why did the suffrage activists keep their distance from the feminist campaign for girls' education? Two major presumptions are

put forward to answer this question. The first and most important reason is that the relationship between Victorian suffragism and education was a complex one, and historians have long argued over whether campaigns for women's boarding and grammar schools and colleges can be termed as 'feminist'. In addition, the major historians of electoral politics in the nineteenth century tended always to focus upon the circumstances that prompted the evolution of the suffrage movement, rather than to focus on the achievements being made in education.

4. The Absence of the Suffrage Activists from the Feminist Campaign to Repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts

In the nineteenth century, the study of sexuality was one of the most dynamic academic enterprises. Among the most popular topics was prostitution. The intent of this section is not to examine the way in which the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed, but to offer an objective judgment through which to argue that the suffrage advocates were not interested in the issues of sexuality and prostitution. When analyzing the available historical sources documenting the history of sexuality and prostitution, it is easy to notice that historians have rarely commented on the active participation of the suffrage activists in the repeal campaign.

The campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts was one of the defining political causes of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement. The extraordinarily introduced Acts and the successful campaign to repeal them have, in fact, been explored already in many ways by historians and other scholars. The women's campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts was best articulated by Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980). In effect, Walkowitz concentrated on nineteenth-century political culture and the cultural and social contests over sexuality and prostitution. Aiming to contribute to the growing history of feminists and feminism by examining attitudes towards sexuality and the experience of women's resistance to the laws and the double standard, Walkowitz has listed about twenty-two women involved in the repeal effort. Four feminists belonged to Non-conformists sects, twelve were feminist Quakers, four were Freethinkers, and two were Anglicans (p. 102).

Published in 2002, Sung-Sook Lee's doctoral research work examined the mid-Victorian women's Campaign from 1869 to 1886 to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869. More specifically, Lee focused on the way in which Evangelicalism contributed both to the pressures for the Acts and to the movement to repeal them and of how religious and feminist networks constituted an empowering structure that united the repealers into a single, irresistible force. The author argued that the repealers' successful campaign was rooted in the very close links, both of kinship and friendship, between those feminists and religious networks, women Quakers.

In the 1870s and the 1880s, one of chief concerns of Quakers was the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Their periodicals and Yearly Meetings repeatedly referred to the agitation concerning what was euphemistically known as Social Purity. A manifesto which appeared in the *Shield* at the beginning of 1870 shows the names of many Quakers. From the beginning, the Quakers launched a nation-wide campaign's of agitation, which they invited Josephine Butler to lead. (pp.117-161).

Interestingly, Josephine Butler, a national leader of the repeal campaign, recalled that the Quaker women provided a wide, nationally-linked support mechanism for the repeal campaign. The Quakers were, Butler argued, among the first to welcome the public action of women in this matter; and the earliest public meetings addressed by women on this question were held in Quaker meeting houses (Butler, 1893/2011, pp. 238-239).

While scholar Laura Schwartz (2012) has examined the role that Freethinkers and Secularists played in the repeal campaign. In her opinion, the repeal campaign was of immediate interest to some Freethinking feminists such as Harriet Martineau, Annie Besant, and Elizabeth Wolstenholme, who began straight away to debate the implications of the Acts and the way in which to bring about their repeal. Furthermore, the Secularists made more explicit arguments in favour of women's right to sexual promiscuity, with the emphasis on a commitment to the preservation of personal liberty. The central

argument of the repeal campaign was that men should abide by the same ethical standards as women, and to remain chaste until they married. The Secularists, on the other hand, argued that chastity was not a solution to resolve the problem of prostitution, for it denied the inherent expression of sexuality. As a result, they helped to spread ideas about the negative image of women characterised as subordinated, silent victims of male sexual abuse, which emerged from the uncritical study of pornographic literature (pp. 177-178).

If the suffrage advocates kept their distance from the campaign to repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, why did they receive such historical attention from scholars of the post-1850s feminist movement? The justification for this view is often traced back to the views of the historians of electoral politics, who stressed that the feminist campaigns cannot be viewed in isolation from the question of suffrage. For example, Kathryn Anderson (1997) claimed that the franchise assisted in the continuing struggle for women's political equality. She also revealed how powerfully the suffrage movement transformed individual lives, by enabling women to act as political actors, and enhancing other social reform activities on electoral politics (p. 101).

As the previous arguments illustrate, the women's suffrage advocates were not involved in the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (C.D. Acts). In addition, they had not organised public meetings, petition campaigns and electoral leagues to influence public opinion about the passive impact of the Acts on women.

Conclusion

The historical accounts of women suffrage are generally designed to acquaint the reader with the known facts and to connect women's emancipation with the franchise. The suffrage movement does not merit the increasingly scholarly attention it received from scholars of the post-1850 feminist movement. One of the reasons is that the suffragists failed to obtain the right to vote to women. In addition, the suffragists' neutral position on girls' education and the reform of laws on prostitution isolated politically their movement. That is, they mainly attempted to spur changes in the legal and political status of women at the expense of other aspects.

If the unprecedented introduction of democracy to England and the spread of it were attributed to the suffragists, the advocacy project on women's issues was not their legacy. The 'Woman Question' was

more than a demand for suffrage. As Cady Stanton has pointed out, “it is a question of woman’s work, her wages, her property, her education, her physical training, her social status, her political equalization, her marriage and her divorce” (JoEllen, 2009, p. 10). Thus, historians of feminism need to evaluate the suffrage movement in relation to the main issues that nineteenth-century feminists were concerned about, including education and the reform of laws on prostitution.

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