

Women in Edwardian Society

National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) Pamphlet

Directions: With your group members, read the following primary source document and then discuss the Connection questions together.

This page is one of many pamphlets published between 1909 and 1914 by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, which lobbied the government to secure women the right to vote.

SOME REASONS

Why Working Women Want the Vote.

Because as long as women cannot vote for Members of Parliament they are not asked what they want, and they are treated like children who do not know what is good or what is bad for them.

Because only those who wear the shoe know where it pinches, and women know best what they want and what they don't want.

Because Members of Parliament must attend to the wants and wishes of those who have votes, and they have not time to attend to the wants and wishes of women who have not got votes.

Because laws are made which specially affect women's work and the work of their children.

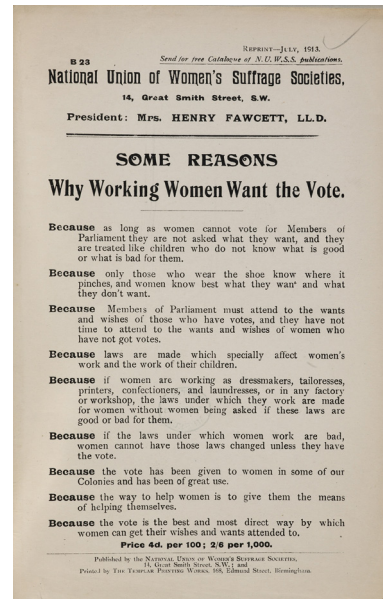
Because if women are working as dressmakers, tailoresses, printers, confectioners, and laundresses, or in any factory or workshop, the laws under which they work are made for women without women being asked if these laws are good or bad for them.

Because if the laws under which women work are bad, women cannot have those laws changed unless they have the vote.

Because the vote has been given to women in some of our Colonies and has been of great use.

Because the way to help women is to give them the means of helping themselves.

Because the vote is the best and most direct way by which women can get their wishes and wants attended to.¹



Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. Why might the needs and wants of women have been ignored by Parliament?
2. What does the phrase 'only those who wear the shoe know where it pinches' mean? Why might the writer of the pamphlet have chosen to use this phrase?
3. Why do you think men resisted giving women the vote? What does it suggest about how they viewed gender, a central feature of one's identity?
4. Do you think women make the most of the fact they have the vote in present-day society? Explain your view.
5. What does the content of this pamphlet make you think and feel? Explain your view.
6. What is the most valuable idea in this pamphlet? What makes you say that?
7. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this pamphlet in your notebooks.

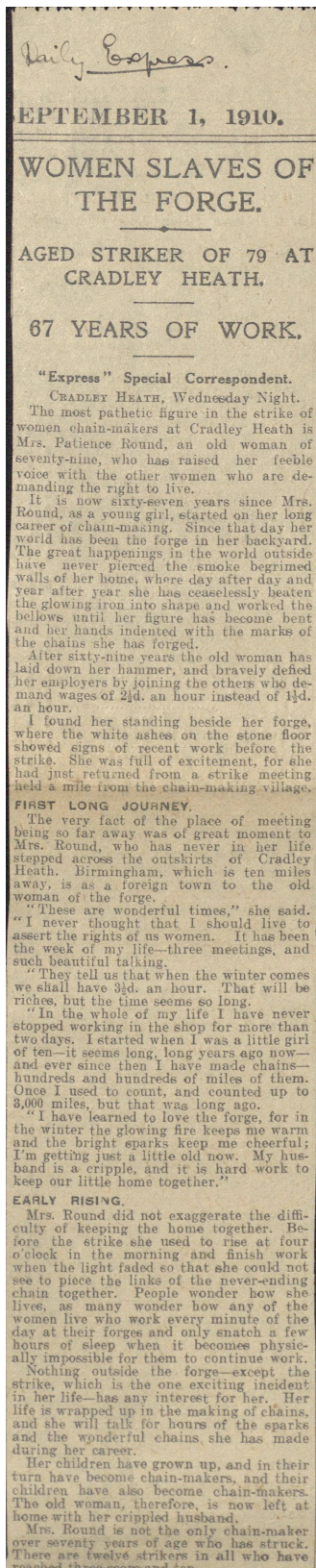
¹ NUWSS Pamphlets, British Library (London: 1909–14), <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/nuwss-pamphlets>.

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Factory Conditions in Edwardian Society

Directions: With your group members, read the following primary source document and then discuss the Connection questions together.

This press cutting from 1st September 1910 is taken from a newspaper called the Daily Express. It concerns the Cradley Heath Chain Makers' Strike, during which women went on strike against exploitative working conditions.



September 1, 1910.

WOMEN SLAVES OF THE FORGE.

AGED STRIKER OF 79 AT CRADLEY HEATH.

67 YEARS OF WORK.

"Express" Special Correspondent.

CRADLEY HEATH, Wednesday Night. The most pathetic figure in the strike of women chain-makers at Cradley Heath is Mrs. Patience Round, an old woman of seventy-nine, who has raised her feeble voice with the other women who are demanding the right to live.

It is now sixty-seven years since Mrs. Round, as a young girl, started on her long career of chain-making. Since that day her world has been the forge in her backyard. The great happenings in the world outside have never pierced the smoke begrimed walls of her home, where day after day and year after year she has ceaselessly beaten the glowing iron into shape and worked the bellows until her figure has become bent and her hands indented with the marks of the chains she has forged.

After sixty-nine years the old woman has laid down her hammer, and bravely defied her employers by joining the others would demand wages of 2½d. an hour instead of 1½d. an hour.

I found her standing beside her forge, where the white ashes on the stone floor showed signs of recent work before the strike. She was full of excitement, for she had just returned from a strike meeting held a mile from the chain-making village.

FIRST LONG JOURNEY.

The very fact of the place of meeting being so far away was of great moment to Mrs. Round, who has never in her life stepped across the outskirts of Cradley Heath. Birmingham, which is ten miles away, is as a foreign town to the old woman of the forge.

"These are wonderful times," she said. "I never thought that I should live to assert the rights of us women. It has been the week of my life—three meetings, and such beautiful talking."

"They tell us that when the winter comes we shall have 3½d. an hour. That will be riches, but the time seems so long."

"In the whole of my life I have never stopped working in the shop for more

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than two days. I started when I was a little girl of ten—it seems long, long years ago now—and ever since then I have made chains—hundreds and hundreds of miles of them. Once I used to count, and counted up to 3,000 miles, but that was long ago.

“I have learned to love the forge, for in the winter the glowing fire keeps me warm and the bright sparks keep me cheerful; I’m getting just a little old now. My husband is a cripple, and it is hard work to keep our little home together.”

EARLY RISING.

Mrs. Round did not exaggerate the difficulty of keeping the home together. Before the strike she used to rise at four o’clock in the morning and finish work when the light faded so that she could not see to piece the links of the never-ending chain together. People wonder how she lives, as many wonder how any of the women live who work every minute of the day at their forges and only snatch a few hours of sleep when it becomes physically impossible for them to continue work.

Nothing outside of the forge—except the strike, which is the one exciting incident in her life—has any interest for her. Her life is wrapped up in the making of chains, and she will talk for hours of the sparks and the wonderful chains she has made during her career.

Her children have grown up, and in their turn have become chain-makers, and their children have also become chain-makers. The old woman, therefore, is now left at home with her crippled husband.

Mrs. Round is not the only chain-maker over seventy years of age who has struck. There are twelve strikers in all who have reached three-score-and-ten.¹

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does the newspaper article title suggest about the working conditions for chain makers?
2. How does the author of the article describe Mrs Patience Round in the opening paragraph? What impact does this description have?
3. Which features of Mrs Round’s identity influence how she is treated? What does this suggest about Edwardian society?
4. Are there any modern-day examples in which people have to endure such working conditions? Explain your view.
5. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
6. What is the most valuable idea in this newspaper article? What makes you say that?
7. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks.

¹ Women Slaves of the Forge’ (press cutting), 1 September 1910, Trades Union Congress, <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p21047coll2/id/142/rec/1>.

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'Woman's Rights': A Poem

Directions: With your group members, read the following primary source document and then discuss the Connection questions together.

This poem, which was written by an anonymous poet in the second half of the nineteenth century when women began to demand more rights, outlines Victorian gender expectations of women and their role in society. It was printed on a small blue card, which suggests it would have been handed out in public as a reminder to women and as a warning.

WOMAN'S RIGHTS

The right to be a comforter,
When other comforts fail;
The right to cheer the drooping heart
When troubles most assail.

The right to train the infant mind,
To think of Heaven and God;
The right to guide the tiny feet
The path our Saviour trod.

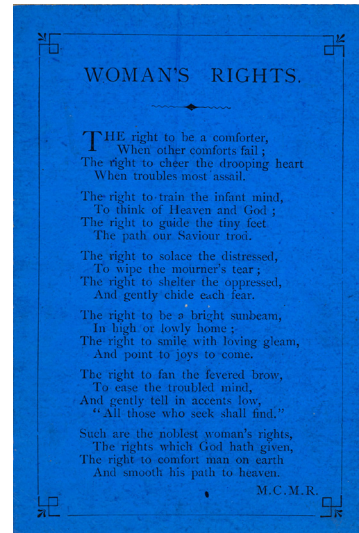
The right to solace the distressed,
To wipe the mourner's tear;
The right to shelter the oppressed,
And gently chide each fear.

The right to be a bright sunbeam,
In high or lowly home;
The right to smile with loving gleam,
And point to joys to come.

The right to fan the fevered brow,
To ease the troubled mind,
And gently tell in accents low,
"All those who seek shall find."

Such are the noblest woman's rights,
The rights which God hath given,
The right to comfort man on earth
And smooth his path to heaven.

M.C.M.R.¹



Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What 'rights' does this poem identify as belonging to women?
2. This poem was written when the women's rights movement was starting to gain momentum. Why do you think someone would have chosen to write this poem?
3. What does this poem suggest are the most important features of a woman's identity? How does this oversimplify women?
4. Are the ways expectations are placed upon women in this poem similar to or different from expectations today? Explain your view.
5. What does the content of this poem make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
6. What is the most valuable idea in this poem? What makes you say that?
7. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this poem in your notebooks.

¹ "Woman's Rights", a 19th Century Verse', British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-19th-century-verse-on-womans-rights>.

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'Freedom or Death' Speech: The Plight of Female Industrial Workers

Directions: With your group members, read the following primary source document and then discuss the Connection questions together.

Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the British suffragette movement, delivered this speech in Connecticut, America on 13th November 1913. In this excerpt from Pankhurst's speech, she discusses the plight of female industrial workers.

First of all there is the condition of the working woman. One of the things which gives strength to our agitation¹ is that the women who are taking an active part in it are not the poorest women, are not the overworked women; they are the women who are held to be fortunate, the women who have no special personal grievance of their own. Those women have taken up this fight for their own sake, it is true, because they wish to be free, but chiefly for the sake of the women less fortunate than themselves. The industrial workers of Great Britain have an average wage, mind you, not a minimum wage, an average wage, of less than two dollars a week. Think what would happen in any country if the men in industry of that country had to subsist on a wage like that. Thousands upon thousands of these women – because there are over five million wage earners in my country – thousands of these women have depend[ants]; they are women with children dependent upon them, deserted wives with children dependent on them, or wives with sick husbands; they are unmarried mothers, or they are unmarried women who have old parents or younger brothers and sisters, or sick relatives dependent upon them. ... To speak of the sweated home-worker would take too long, but there are women, women even with depend[ants], only able to earn three or four shillings a week, thousands of them, and having to pay with the increased cost of living, exorbitant rents in our great cities for single rooms, so that you get several families in one room: they cannot afford even to have a room for themselves.²

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does Pankhurst suggest about her situation and that of other suffragettes fighting for the vote?
2. Why are the low wages particularly difficult for women? What responsibilities do they have which men might not? Why?
3. Which features of an industrial working woman's identity influence how she is treated in Edwardian society? What does this suggest about social values and identity?
4. Are workers treated the same today? Explain your answer.
5. What does the content of this excerpt make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
6. What is the most valuable idea in this speech? What makes you say that?
7. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this speech in your notebooks.

¹ The 'agitation' Pankhurst refers to is the fight to get women the vote.

² Emmeline Pankhurst, 'Freedom or Death – part 3' (speech), 1913, <https://theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/27/greatspeeches3>.

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'Freedom or Death' Speech: Women in Marriage

Directions: With your group members, read the following primary source document and then discuss the Connection questions together.

Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the British suffragette movement, delivered this speech in Connecticut, America on 13th November 1913. In this excerpt from Pankhurst's speech, she describes the marriage laws and their impact on women.

The marriage laws of our country are bringing hundreds and hundreds of women into the militant ranks because we cannot get reform, the kind of reform that women want, of our marriage laws. First of all, a girl is held marriageable by English law, at the age of twelve years. When I was on trial they produced a little girl as a witness. ... It was said that it was a terrible thing to bring a little girl of twelve years of age and put her in the witness box in a court of law. I agreed, but I pointed out to the judge and the jury that one of the reasons why women were in revolt was because that little girl, whose head just appeared over the top of the witness box, was considered old enough by the laws of her country to take upon herself the terrible responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood, and women could not get it altered, no politicians would listen to us, when we asked to have the marriage law altered in that particular.

Then, the position of the wife. ... [A]ccording to English law, a woman may toil all her life for her husband and her family, she may work in her husband's business, she may help him to build up the family income, and if he chooses at the end of a long life to take every penny of the money that woman has helped to earn away from her and her children, he can do it She may at the end of a long, hard life find herself and her children absolutely penniless ...

Then take her as a mother. ... [S]he has no voice whatever in deciding the life of her child. Her husband ... decides absolutely the conditions in which that child is to live; he decides how it is to be educated; he can even decide what religion it is to profess, and the mother's consent is not obtained to any of these decisions.¹

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What situation does Pankhurst describe when she was on trial? What is surprising about it?
2. Which features of a woman's identity are considered to be of most importance? What are the consequences of this?
3. What do you think the impact would have been on children growing up in houses where their father possessed all power? Explain your view.
4. Are the expectations placed upon women in this poem similar to or different from expectations today? Explain your view.
5. What does the content of this excerpt make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
6. What is the most valuable idea in this speech? What makes you say that?
7. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this speech in your notebooks.

¹ Emmeline Pankhurst, 'Freedom or Death - part 3' (speech), 1913, <https://theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/27/greatspeeches3>.