

**YASMIN ALIBHAI BROWN**

Monday 27 May 2013

13

## Special report: The new suffragettes - unfinished business

A hundred years after Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King's racehorse at the Derby, the rights she fought for are largely taken for granted in Britain. But there are still many places around the world where women risk their lives in pursuit of basic freedoms. This week-long series celebrates some of the bravest



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On 4 June 1913, Emily Wilding Davison, 40, showed up at the Epsom Derby. A passionate and sometimes reckless suffragette, she was consumed with fury and a sense of injustice, real, not imagined. Ladylike tactics and quiet lobbying had failed to move the masters of the state, so some women had turned combative.

Davison had been imprisoned eight times for obstructive, sometimes violent behaviour. With fellow inmates she had gone on hunger strike and been forcibly fed. In her seminal work, *A Century of Women*, historian Sheila Rowbotham describes the practice: "The woman was held down, a gag was

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placed over her mouth and tubes were then inserted into her nose and throat.” Jaws were broken, gums shredded, internal organs damaged. Sylvia Pankhurst recorded her own experiences in excruciating detail. The women cut themselves with broken glass to avoid the torture. In 1912, Davison threw herself down an iron staircase in Holloway Prison and sustained serious injuries to her head and spine. Her body never recovered but pain could not break her resolve.

Personal tribulations had forged Davison’s politics. She was forced to drop out of college in 1892 because her mother, a widow, could not afford the costs. Undaunted, she became a teacher, saved money, got into Oxford and passed with First Class honours. She could not graduate, though, as Oxford then did not award women’s degrees, so she went and got a First Class degree from London University.

In 1903, she joined the forceful Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), just formed by the Pankhursts and other leading lights who had had enough of genteel politicking. But she was never really one of them. According to Davison’s biographers Ann Morley and Liz Stanley: “Emily’s habit of acting on her own initiative meant she... was seen by them rather as an unpredictable thorn in the flesh” (The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison, Women’s Press, 1988).

On that Derby day, Davison stepped out on to the race track and lunged at Anmer, a horse owned by King George V. She was trampled and died four days later. To this day, her motives are contested. Did she intend to kill herself or create a stir, a memorable scene? Was her death a tragic accident or martyrdom? We’ll never know.

By then suffragettes were regularly vilified by politicians and press, depicted as frustrated spinsters and extremists. Just a year after Davison’s tragic death, a correspondent in the Derby Daily Express called for the “shaving of the heads of every militant suffragette and a whipping with ‘the cat-o’-nine tails”.

I first learnt about the woman under the king’s horse in a history lesson in school in Uganda. Soon afterwards, I made a speech during assembly about the absence of democracy under our British rulers and was suspended for a week for being “mutinous and seditious”. Davison has been my heroine ever since, along with all those other gutsy British women who fought tirelessly for the vote.

The Great Reform Act of 1832 extended the vote to men with some property but explicitly excluded females. Twenty years later the Sheffield Female Political Association started petitioning parliament for enfranchisement. In 1868, the Court of Common Pleas ruled that “every women is personally incapable of voting”. But John Stuart Mill, campaigning to be elected in 1865, explicitly supported women’s suffrage. His book, The Subjugation of Women (1869), added heat and light to the emerging movement for female emancipation and full participation.

The London Society for Women’s Suffrage was formed in 1867. They were middle class and formidable, not unlike the Women’s Institute members who humiliated Tony Blair when he addressed them. Working class women were getting politicised too, mainly as a result of appalling working conditions in factories. A strike at Bryant & May matchstick factory in London, in 1888, brought out nearly 1,400 women. Parallel groups sprang up elsewhere. The sheer number of organisations and groups was both good and troublesome. Internecine quarrels and party-political and class divides too often sapped the energy of the campaign (if it ever was a campaign) and slowed them down.

But the women’s determination cannot be faulted. They were abused, sexually assaulted (sometimes even by their own husbands), injured (while chained to railings and by police) and in some cases killed. Yet the suffragettes kept

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going.

By 1884, 66 per cent of men could vote. Women felt their exclusion more keenly and agitated more fervently. Parliamentarians, including Gladstone and other men of influence, ferociously opposed the upstarts. They averred that nation would keel over if the skirted brigade got its way.

British suffragettes developed international alliances and inspired world leaders. Gandhi visited Britain in 1906 and was deeply affected by the movement's moral case. Women were central to the Indian struggle for freedom too, and suffered dreadfully. (Their prize would be universal franchise after independence.)

In June 1917, the Women's Coronation Procession (which hoped to enlist the support of the new King George V for limited women's suffrage) included Indian activists in gorgeous saris, and others from all corners of the empire. Sophia Singh, daughter of Duleep Singh, the exiled Prince of Punjab whose lands and Kohi-noor diamond had already been taken by the British, refused to pay British tax without representation – and so they impounded her jewellery. Finally, in 1928, British women won the democratic rights many had fought for relentlessly and selflessly.

Interestingly, British dominions, South Australia and New Zealand granted votes to women in 1893 and 1895 respectively, perhaps because as mothers, women had more value and therefore clout in colonial outposts where white people were in a minority. Democratic equality campaigns started up in the USA in around 1900. There, women had to face down the cult of womanhood, home and hearth – still a potent cultural force. Remember how in 1992, Hillary Clinton had to prove she could make better cookies than Barbara Bush?

Progress in Europe was slow and erratic. Finland granted women votes in 1906, followed by Germany in 1918. France and Italy caught up in the mid 1940s. The Swiss finally and begrudgingly got there in 1971.

So what of today? Do young women value the vote and remember the suffragettes? A MORI poll in 2010 found that a third of British females did not cast a vote in the 2010 election. According to a newly published Hansard Society audit, 38 per cent of women are interested in politics; 35 per cent know about the subject; and 38 per cent describe themselves as certain to vote. The figures for men are 46 per cent, 52 per cent and 44 per cent respectively. A spokesperson for the society told me this is a complete change from earlier decades, when women were more politically involved than men.

To find out more about these attitudes, a young journalist, Rebecca Myers, carried out a mini-survey for this article. It included online questions on social media, plus qualitative interviews with university students, schoolgirls and a random street sample. There were just over 100 respondents; most were aged between 16 and 22. Forty per cent had never voted, and 48 per cent said they took the vote for granted

One respondent, Alys Cooke, 22, pointed out: "The stats show that it's overwhelmingly the over-fifties who vote. The turnout for young people, I think was 17 per cent in the last election. They feel disengaged from political stuff." Another, Abigail Lewis, 19, said: "I don't feel political representatives make enough of an effort to engage me and deserve my vote." A third, Alex, 22, said "What's the point? One vote in a million?"

Some of the responses in the street interviews were shocking in their complacency. "I don't think I've ever voted ... Dunno. I don't really understand the voting thing ... What's the voting for? Is it the Queen?" I recommend listening to interviews with women on the importance of suffrage at independent.co.uk. Davison should rise from the dead, maybe chain herself to railings outside Topshop, and shout some sense into this generation.

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But there is no need for total pessimism: some achievements are irreversible. Our research suggested that younger schoolgirls are ardent about politics. I was not a Margaret Thatcher groupie, but many women saw her as a role model, including the Spice Girls, who in turn became symbols of independent "girl power". Harriet Harman is now Britain's longest continuously serving female MP, and Theresa May is proving her mettle in a difficult department which has sunk many men before her. Younger female MPs of all parties, political aides and policy wonks are the worthy daughters of the old suffragettes.

But complacency and indifference remain, and stain the very name of democracy. The stain is made worse by the truth that women in many countries crave and are literally dying for the vote and human dignity.

In Saudi Arabia women cannot drive, have no freedoms and as yet do not have electoral equality with males, although some changes are being introduced, slowly.

Millions of women who stood with men during Arab Spring uprisings are now being pushed back into veils, homes, impotence or imprisonment. In Iran's elections next month, women are banned from standing. Those we saw in the last election have been suppressed or jailed.

Across the world, women's bodies have become sites of political warfare. Veils, chosen or not, are, to me, a visual statement of low status and dehumanisation. The rape and murder of the young Delhi student in India, or physical violations in the Congo, South Africa and so many other lands, are a backlash against emancipation and equality.

Yet women, with extraordinary courage, are continuing to fight. Some are among the "New Suffragettes" celebrated overleaf and for the rest of this series. African women are on the rise: two have been elected as presidents in Liberia and Malawi. In Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, the billionaire Prime Minister, is reinstating the old order and conservative Islam, yet during the electoral process women defied that order and conservatism. Last time round, not a single vote was cast by a women in 500 booths. They were not allowed out by family men and community elders. (This happens in some Muslim enclaves in Britain too.) This time the Taliban used bullets and bombs to intimidate women, but millions of them, dressed in bright clothes, came out.

In Uganda, the first ever elections in 1962 were violent, especially for women. Twilight Mwaka, wife of our watchman, stood in line to vote and soldiers started abusing, then hitting her – for a full two hours. Battered and bruised, she cast her vote and then collapsed. She had no regrets and told me in Swahili, "Always vote, and tell your daughters why it is so important." I have always voted and told my daughter why.

Additional research by Rebecca Myers

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**LIONSINGH** 22 hours ago

why has my comment been removed ? I support fully the equality of all and women to be empowered to make thier own decisions about their bodies and role they choose to take in any society. I mentioned the many on the streets in Dehli demanding equality and for every women who pushes for it in any society to have our utmost respect !!

REPLY

+ | 2 | -



**ULIDIAN** 14 hours ago

Your comment probably wasn't removed. The Voices system makes posts disappear all of its own accord. It's a pathetic system and has been losing my posts since its introduction. I've written to the Independent on several occasions to ask the to fix it or go back to Disqus, but all I get is assurances that it's being looked into. Last week, I emailed the editor, but I have had no response. Maybe what it'll take is for large numbers of us to bombard them with emails.

REPLY

+ | 0 | -



**ANGUS MCFARLANE** 22 hours ago

'In Saudi Arabia women cannot drive, have no freedoms .....' (Mizz Brown) Really! Saudi Arabia was the birthplace of the prophet of Islam, Mohammed. And we are constantly told that Islam grants women loads of freedom. In fact, Westerners were running around in animal skins and dragging their knuckles along the ground while women in Islam were enjoying the fruits of Islam's teachings. So, what went wrong? When were all these freedoms taken away? Or, horror of horrors, twas ever thus??!

REPLY

+ | 0 | -



**ULIDIAN** 14 hours ago

Someone was using your name earlier, to say that the Russian women who were going topless to draw attention to their campaign for human rights would lose their impact as they got older and their bodies began to sag. It can't have been you Angus, because you're obviously genuine in your concern for women's rights.

REPLY

+ | 0 | -



**ANGUS MCFARLANE** 4 hours ago

@Ulidian What Islam doesn't understand is that 'women's rights' are an integral part of 'human rights', because women are human beings, too. That's why equality of men and women is a natural consequence of 'human rights' in the secular world. In Islam, the gender apartheid taught and enforced by Islam shows another of the fault lines between Dar al Islam and the civilized, secular world. That's why it is absolutely bizarre for Islam to claim it treats women better than women in secular societies.

REPLY

+ | 1 | -



**JULIA.LONDON** 13 hours ago

In pre-Islamic Arabia it was common for a dissatisfied father to bury a newborn daughter alive. The prophet was against this. This week a Saudi preacher who raped and murdered his 5-year old daughter, has not been given a death or prison sentence, but is to pay his wife £31,000 blood money for the loss of the child. That's amazing progress in only a thousand years or so isn't it? Islam is amazing.

REPLY

+ | 0 | -



**LIONSINGH** 22 hours ago

I agree there needs a lot more to be done to break glass ceilings in the UK, unfortunately in many other parts of the world it is a concrete bunker women have to escape from. The recent demos in India for Dimini is an example of society refuting the old limitations and demanding as a right equality. Such examples of the massive Dehli protests to the few brave Saudi women driving a car unaccompanied are in the spirit of the Suffragettes. Anyone who has lived in a free society where women are more free know they can be a pain in the A\$ but worth it and remarkable when the barriers are broken down. How can any society look down on women when they gave birth to Kings, Presidents, great athletes and Scholars? We as a nation should support all emancipation for these heroes.

REPLY

+ | 1 | -



**ED WHITEHEAD** 1 days ago

''''''

REPLY

+ | 0 | -



**JOEDM** 2 days ago

Its the islamic world that needs suffragettes.

REPLY

+ | 2 | -



**JANDYSONVIABISON** 2 days ago

How about you call them the suffragists, OP? Calling them 'suffragettes' is like referring to feminists as 'Women's Libbers'.



**IAN WATSON** 2 days ago

It is a shame that those obsessed with voting still cannot see that the democratic choice, the absolute right to abstain from voting is just as important as being able to vote. Tony Blair and his ilk want to make voting a compulsory issue thus criminalising those who chose to abstain which in my mind is just as bad as refusing the vote to people across the board.



**JOEDN** 2 days ago

I would like to see everyone having to use their vote, but there should be an option for "None of the above".



**SABCARRERA** 23 hours ago

Actually, Phoney Tony passed a law that deprived British subjects who had been out of the country of the right to vote.

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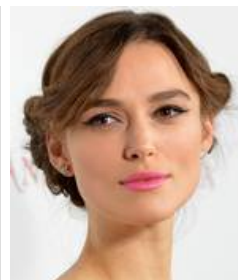
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