

# Feminism & Women's rights | Topic Notes

## **The situation**

Debate on women

Should women receive same education as men, or stay at home?

Should women be full citizens in the state, or were they incapable?

## **Women's status**

Could own property when single, but it all went to the husband when married

Husband had control over children

Husband could divorce wife much more easily than the reverse

Few girls' secondary schools, not allowed to attend university

Could not vote in elections or hold a public office

## **Women's work**

Poorer women before marriage worked as farm labourers, domestic servants or factory hands

Middle class single or widowed women worked as governess or dressmaker (badly paid)

Many worked alongside husbands

## **What was work?**

Women's work was recognised before 1850s, but industrialisation changed attitudes towards work – work became leaving the house to earn money

Shown in changing classification in census of women working alongside husbands – from defined as the same work as husband, to domestic workers, to indefinite and unproductive

## **Escaping Restrictions**

Joined convents (mainly Catholics) – nuns ran schools and hospitals, had influence and power

Emigrated to places like Britain, America and Australia

Voluntary work – orphanages, prisons, refuges for prostitutes

### **Early campaign for women's rights (Isabella Tod)**

Most women campaigning for women's rights were middle-class Protestants

Got the Contagious Diseases Act repealed

Along with Anna Haslam, campaigned for and got married women's rights for their own property

### **Beginning of Suffrage movement**

Women realised that they needed the vote to make politicians pay attention to them

Tod set up The Northern Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage

She toured the country, giving speeches and writing pamphlets and articles

Educational advances made women more insistent on getting the right to vote

Women got the right to bot for local councils and to sit on district councils

Anna Haslam set up Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA)

35 women won seats on district councils

### **Nationalism and feminism**

Inghinidhe na hÉireann grew out of demonstrations against Queen Victoria's visit

'Buy Irish' campaigns, free classes for children, céilidhe, plays (influenced Yeats and started off Irish actresses), free meals for poor children in schools

Republican, helped form Sinn Féin

### **Campaigning for full franchise**

Couldn't vote in parliamentary elections

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

Joined IWSLGA, but grew impatient with its gentle policy of petitions and letter-writing

### **Dividing politicians**

Militant feminists began to organise demonstrations and interrupt political meetings – forced politicians to pay attention

All parties divided about it, except Labour – all feared women would vote for their opponents

Individual MPs supported it though, so a number of bills were introduced to extend the vote to women

### **Irish Women's Franchise League**

Set up by Sheehy Skeffington

More militant, made public speeches and organised demonstrations

### **Violence**

Women of the IWFL smashed windows of government buildings – 6 arrested, including Sheehy Skeffington

Feminists outraged by sentences, but general public disapproved of the violence

Three militant feminists attacked PM Asquith with axe, accidentally hit Redmond

Arrested, went on hunger strike (Sh-S joined them)

Attack publicly unpopular

Continued damaging gov. property, 35 women imprisoned over 2 years

They used hunger strike policy – gov force-fed them, then used so-called 'Cat and mouse act'

Eventually agreed to give women political status

### **Home Rule and Women**

In the beginning

Home Rule leaders opposed votes for women strongly

Women's societies protested, passed a resolution expressing 'profound regret'

As HR crisis deepened

Some women thought nationalism took priority

Some women thought unionism took priority – so forces split

For some, women's issues remained priority – namely Sheehy Skeffington and Haslam (Sh S's husband killed in 1916, she went from pacifist to militant republican)