

Helen Pankhurst on how far women's rights have come since the suffragettes



Women are still fighting for equality, despite huge progress since the suffragette campaigns. How far have we still to go and how might we get there? [Helen Pankhurst](#) draws on her new book to provide some answers.

How far have women's rights come since the battles on the streets of London between the political establishment and the suffragettes? How far since the land now occupied by the LSE was at the heart of the fight as the headquarters of the Women's Social and Political Union? The area that students, teachers and other staff all tread today is also where the suffragettes had a tea-shop – logistically and socially an important space for the women – and where their journal 'Votes for Women' was printed. Time divides us but the physical space, the ground we walk on, is the same.

So how far have we come? It was with this question in mind that, building up to the centenary of when some women (i.e. propertied women over 30 and those with a university education) finally won the right to vote, I started work, myself linked to the LSE as a visiting Professor then a Visiting Senior Fellow. I interviewed hundreds of women, and looked at secondary sources, including the ephemera and other documents housed at the wonderful Women's Library – another link with LSE. The result is the book '[Deeds Not Words: The Story of Women's Rights, Then and Now](#)'.

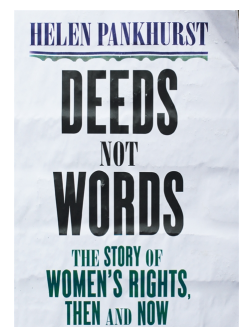
The suffragettes and other suffrage pioneers took their courage in their own hands, refusing a destiny that subordinated them. In the process, they changed laws and social norms. Talk to many families around the UK and that idea that women's vote was particularly hard-won and therefore particularly precious still resonates. It is the view that women must vote and engage more widely in politics because other women sacrificed so much – including their lives – for this right.

Equally important is the point that the establishment rewards those who vote. The result is a vicious cycle, repeated and exacerbated by the linked, equally vicious circle around representation in parliament and all the barriers of not just to being elected, but also to having a voice and then a whole other cycle around being able to use that voice to progress specific gendered rather than party political interests. Women now make up 32% of the House of Commons, 26% of the House of Lords with not totally dissimilar figures in the devolved assemblies, in local government and in the legislature. Furthermore, we have had women in many of the top political appointments, however, few are those would argue that in politics and policy we have got to our end destination.

Moving away from politics narrowly defined, how have we progressed in terms of the different areas of women's lives? In terms of women at work and their financial position? Their sense of identity as women and their relationships with their families? What about women's agency and portrayal in culture? Attitudes towards the sexualisation of women and issues of violence against women? These are all massive areas to explore and many are intertwined in terms of their effects. These are the issues looked at in my book providing a broad-sweep overview with the use of quotes from my interviewees and many statistics to help to tell a nuanced story. At the end of each of these chapters I also score the progress from zero to five – encouraging my reader to do likewise – to be able to weigh up progress across different aspects of women's lives. I ended up giving the highest score for the chapter on culture and the lowest for the chapter on violence.

One of the clear themes, explored in most depth in a chapter on power, which also looks at the issue of intersectionality, is that the opportunities for many women and girls have increased, through the agency of individuals, through the challenge to social norms and through structural legal change – in fact for the most part through a combination of the three. But although the progress in many areas is tangible, there is the need to qualify this rosy conclusion: change isn't always unidirectional, nor does it benefit all.

Most importantly for an activist, the question explored in the epilogue, is how can we speed things up? What can we do in the next decade to 2028, the year women and men were finally granted the rights to vote on the same grounds? And we really must keep vigil for we assume



progress at our peril as Mitch, a retired prison governor put it:

Change can sometimes be of the elastic band kind. You take the strain and stretch forward for progress. You begin to see real change, new motivations, a future. And then you ease the pressure – you tire, you're moved to a new post, vital funding is cut. And the elastic band does what it does best, snaps back to its original shape. You just can't let up the pressure, can't relax, can't ever believe the job is done. And that's the mistake feminists and feminist institutions make, believing that an issue is solved, and it's OK to take your eye off the ball.

My call is for us all to do our bit in stretching the elastic band, to be part of the transformation in our own personal and professional lives, to keep stretching it until it can no longer snap back. Role modelling egalitarian practices at home, in parenting, and caring are also for many people the place from which we can be most effective at disrupting patterns of gender inequality. At work, it includes always being conscious of who is at tables of influence, who is speaking, even more subtly who is being heard and who is expected to take the back seat and provide support. It is all about being conscious of entitlements and then, personally and collectively, disrupting them to ensure they no longer drive and perpetuate the agenda.

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book, '[Deeds Not Words: The Story of Women's Rights, Then and Now](#)', published in 2018 by Sceptre.

About the Author



Helen Pankhurst is an international development and women's rights activist and writer, a senior Advisor to CARE International, a Visiting Professor at MMU and was a Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE in 2018.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: [Public Domain](#).