Who were the suffragettes?

What did they want to achieve and how did they go about it?

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What have you learnt about women’s rights in the early Twentieth Century?

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**The suffragette campaign for a women’s right to vote.**

World War I proved to be the turning point for the campaign. The suffragettes effectively put on hold their campaign of civil direct action in the interests of national unity. As men went to the Western Front, women proved how indispensable they were in the fields and armaments factories.

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| Many arrests were made |

By 1918, no government could resist and the Representation of the Peoples Act allowed women over 30 the right to vote. It would take a further 10 years to abolish the age qualification and put men and women on an equal footing. To mark the centenary of the votes-for-women movement, a National Archives exhibition emphasises that the suffragettes were not all well-to-do Edwardian women, as history popularly has it. At its height it became one of the few political movements in the history of Britain to cut across all classes - for no woman could vote, regardless of her position. Many of the upper-middle class women jailed for suffragette protests found themselves sharing prison with the poorest in society, an experience which greatly influenced much of their future politics.

How were things changing for women around 1918?

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What were the factors that allowed this change?

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**Suffragette movement.**

It was the suffragettes who would really make a difference. The term was first employed in the Daily Mail on the 10th January 1906 and by March of that year it was in general use as a means of differentiating the militant campaigners of the Women's Social and Political Union from the suffragists. The WSPU was formed in Manchester in 1903 by a small group of women led by Emmeline Pankhurst. When a London office was opened in 1906, her daughters Sylvia and Christabel joined her as leaders of a movement which dedicated itself to securing the vote for women to enable them to take full part in the democratic process. They were to achieve this by any militant means, drawing the line at any threat to human life. So they would break windows, throw stones, burn slogans on putting greens, cut telephone and telegraph wires, destroy pillar boxes and burn or bomb empty buildings. Emily Wilding Davison was the martyr of the movement, prepared to give her life for women's rights. Like many of the arrested suffragettes she went on hunger strike in Holloway prison and in 1912 she tried to kill herself by leaping over a stair railing there. Her death came a year later when, with the WSPU flag sewn into her coat, she threw herself in front of the King's Horse at Epsom and died from her injuries. Her coffin, draped in the suffragette colours of white, green and purple, was followed by 2,000 uniformed suffragettes. She was buried near her home in Morpeth in Northumberland and inscribed on her gravestone was 'Deeds not Words'.

**Women in the early Twentieth Centaury.**

At the start of the Twentieth Century, women had a very stereotypical role in British society. If married, they stayed at home to look after the children while their husband worked and brought in a weekly wage. If single, they did work which usually involved some form of service such as working as a waitress, cooking etc. Many young women were simply expected to get married and have children. The term "spinster", though not a term of outright abuse, was still seen as having some form of stigma attached to it, that you were not good enough to get a husband etc.

Towards the end of the C19th, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the first lady to qualify to be a doctor (GP). She then faced huge obstacles making progress in her profession. Men would not go to her simply because she was female , whereas, women usually kept with the way it was done then - they continued seeing a male GP. It took years for Anderson to succeed.

A table of employment gives an example of where women worked in1900:

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| **Type of employment** | **Number of women employed** |
| **Domestic Servants** | **1,740,800** |
| **Teachers** | **124,000** |
| **Nurses** | **68,000** |
| **Doctors** | **212** |
| **Architects** | **2** |

The table clearly shows in which direction women were expected to go should they have work. Many poorly educated young ladies simply worked for a large household as a servant. From here they could train to work in a kitchen but it is highly unlikely that they would have become the head of a kitchen as this was still the 'territory' of the male.

Even "Teachers = 124,000" is somewhat misleading as female teachers nearly all worked in junior or nursery schools. What we would now call secondary schools were staffed by male teachers.

For decades women's progress in British society was haunted by the words of Queen Victoria:

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| **"Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations."** |

Coming from the most famous woman in the world at the time, men in power used these words to hinder the advance women had made. By 1900, women had been granted some improvements in their lifestyle via the law courts - it was only in 1891 that women were told that they could not be forced to live with a man if they did not want to - but because nearly all women were reliant on their husbands for a source of money, many women did live in miserable marriages. The myth that Victorian Britain was the time of great family values in that the family unit stayed together, is just that - a myth. Many wives could not leave their husbands even if they wanted to, simply because they did not have the financial independence that was needed to survive at the time. Also a divorced woman was shunned by society and treated as an outcast. With these obstacles, many women were forced to stay in unhappy marriages.