

Ireland and Votes for Women - The Irish Women's Franchise League


■ Learning Outcomes

- Develop an awareness of the context of the Irish Women's Franchise League (The influence of Suffragettes and events in Britain, Home Rule, etc...).
- Explain the difference between constitutional and militant methods.
- Discuss voting reforms that were granted in 1918.
- Examine primary source documents.
- Apply critical thinking.
- Link to prior knowledge.

■ Some Ideas to Begin: Class Discussion

1. **Go to the Interactive Timeline and discuss the experiences of individual women.** What was revealed about the lives of women in the past? Possible headings for discussion: Work and Conditions, Organisations, Family Life, etc.

Students could individually prepare for this topic by a). Examining the interactive timeline with the use of the discussion headings above and b). Sharing this work in class.

2. **Possible discussion topics: Pair/Group Discussion** 
 - Democracy: Discussion could focus on the definition, what it means to live in a democracy, the rights of citizens, etc.
 - Campaigning: Have students participated in any campaigns? If students were part of a campaign, what actions or strategies did/could they carry out and why?
 - Do students know when women in Ireland won the right to vote?
3. **Isolate and discuss keywords:**
 - Suffrage
 - Franchise

4. **Match the year to the event**

The year that:

- a. the first women received degrees from the Royal University of Ireland.
- b. the 'Married Women's Property Act' was passed. This was the first in a series of laws that gave women ownership and control of their own property. Before these laws, a woman's property was legally controlled by her husband.
- c. the Local Government Act was passed. This allowed women (who were householders) to vote in local elections.

1870, 1884, 1898 (answers on the last page)

Background and establishment of The Irish Women's Franchise League

In 1871, Isabella Tod established the first women's suffrage organisation in Ireland, the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Committee. In 1876, Anna and Thomas Haslam established the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association, which later became the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association. These organisations were constitutional in their approach. They carried out peaceful actions such as petitions, meetings, and lobbying Members of Parliament. Other suffrage groups were soon established. Reforms meant that by the end of the 1800s, some women were allowed to vote in local elections.



Margaret Cousins

The Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) was founded in November 1908 by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins. Like other suffrage groups, they wanted to achieve the vote for women in parliamentary elections. The IWFL felt that methods used by existing suffrage groups were too moderate (mild) and they were prepared to take a more militant approach. This followed the example of the Women's Social and Political Union which was based in Britain and led by the Pankhursts - although the actions of the IWFL were far less militant.

In 1912, the IWFL founded a newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*. The newspaper's motto was: 'For Men and Women Equally the Rights of Citizenship, For Men and Women Equally the Duties of Citizenship'. Various actions were carried out by the IWFL. They published pamphlets, spoke at public meetings, organised lectures, and travelled to promote women's suffrage.

1912-1914

At this time, the leading political party in Ireland was the Irish Parliamentary Party (the Home Rule Party). The IWFL, and other suffrage groups, wanted votes for women to be included in the Third Home Rule Bill. However, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, did not support votes for women. In addition to this, Herbert Asquith - Prime Minister of Britain and leader of the Liberal Party - was also opposed to granting votes for women. Asquith's Liberal Government in Britain had agreed to support Home Rule for Ireland and John Redmond was not prepared to risk his support. On 1 June, 1912, over 20 suffrage groups met in Dublin. They wanted Irish politicians to see the strength of demand for women's suffrage.

The IWFL began militant action in Ireland later that month. Eight IWFL members smashed windows of government buildings, including the G.P.O., and Dublin Castle. They were arrested and served prison sentences of various lengths; Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was imprisoned for two months.

In July 1912, Herbert Asquith visited Ireland. Unknown to the IWFL, a small group of British suffragettes had also travelled to Dublin and one woman, Mary Leigh, threw a hatchet at Asquith. The hatchet missed its target, but injured John Redmond who was in the same carriage. They also attempted to burn down the Theatre Royal where Asquith was due to speak. There was widespread condemnation of these actions, and even though the IWFL was not involved, this condemnation was directed at all suffragettes. The British suffragettes were arrested and imprisoned in Mountjoy. They embarked on a hunger strike and were force-fed. In response to the treatment of these women, some imprisoned IWFL members also joined the hunger strike.

The First World War began in 1914 and suffrage organisations differed in their reactions to the war. For example, branches of the Munster Women's Franchise League decided to support the war effort, whereas the IWFL remained opposed to war. The IWFL continued to campaign for women's suffrage and in August 1914 *The Irish Citizen* featured the headline, 'Votes for Women Now! Damn Your War!' In Britain, Emmeline Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union stopped militant action and focused on war effort activities, such as the employment of women in factories.

1918: End of the First World War and the Extension of the Franchise

As the war reached its final year, The Representation of the People Act was introduced. As Ireland was under British rule at the time, this important Act also applied to Ireland. It gave the vote to all men over the age of 21, military servicemen over the age of 19, and to women over the age of 30 who met certain qualifications; these included owning property, or being a university graduate. In 1911, 15.7% of the Irish population had the right to vote; this increased to 44.1% of the population in 1918.¹

During the war, huge numbers of men lost their lives, and some MPs feared that women would now outnumber men on the election register. This was avoided by restricting the number of women who could vote.

1918 was also the first year that women could be elected as MPs. The first woman elected to the British Parliament was Countess Markievicz. As a member of Sinn Féin she abstained from her seat and became a member of the First Dáil in 1919.

In 1922, all men and women over the age of 21, were given the right to vote in the Irish Free State. Women in Britain had to wait until 1928 to get equal voting rights to men.

Suffrage and the War

Throughout the war, women took on new positions in society, running industries that were traditionally seen as 'male only'. They contributed greatly to the war effort, and to ensuring that services on the home front continued. (For more on the role of women in the war see the Interactive Timeline for May Noonan).

However, historians differ in opinion when discussing just how important the First World War was to the achievement of votes for women. Some think that women were given the vote in recognition of the important role that they played during the war. Other historians believe that, while the war played a part in getting votes for women, other factors, such as the impact of the suffrage movement, changing attitudes in society, and demands for suffrage for all were also responsible.

Suffragist or Suffragette? 'Suffragists' refers to those who campaigned for votes for women through constitutional methods. Militant groups that were formed later became known as 'Suffragettes'. Originally, a reporter in the *Daily Mail* used the term 'Suffragette' to belittle and make fun of women who were campaigning for suffrage as 'ette' is often added to a word to mean small, for example, maisonette or serviette. However, the women took on the title 'Suffragette' and used the motto 'Deeds not Words'.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

- Born in 1877 in Co. Cork.
- Her father was a Home Rule MP.
- Hanna studied Languages and achieved a Masters in Modern Languages. She was part of the first generation of women to graduate from university and achieved a first class honours.



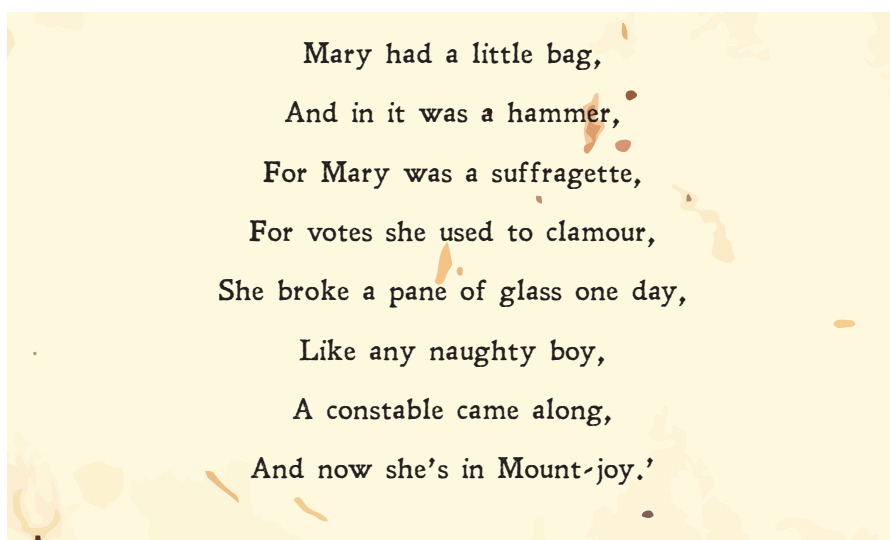
¹ Brian, Walker, 'Votes for women (and men): the Representation of the People Act 1918' in *History Ireland, Issue 3, Volume 26* (May/June 2018).

- In 1903, Hanna married fellow student, Francis Skeffington. In a symbol of equality they took one another's surname. They couple had one son named Owen.
- In 1908, Hanna was a founding member of the Irish Women's Franchise League. Francis, who was heavily involved in the suffrage movement, edited *The Irish Citizen*.
- During the 1916 Rising, Francis (a civilian), was arrested by British forces as he attempted to prevent looting in the city. He was taken to Portobello Barracks for questioning and was shot dead without trial.
- To publicise the treatment of her husband, and the cause of Irish independence, Hanna toured America in 1917. She spoke at 250 meetings and met with American President Woodrow Wilson.
- Hanna joined Sinn Féin. During the War of Independence, she served as a judge in the Republican courts and later rejected the Treaty.
- The 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic had declared equal rights for all citizens. Hanna was strongly against the 1937 Irish Constitution and its treatment of women.
- Hanna Sheehy Skeffington died in 1946 and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. Her headstone reads, 'Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Feminist, Republican, and Socialist'.

Go to the [Source Gallery Section](#) to watch a short film on Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.

■ Primary Sources: Working As A Historian

A. The text below appeared in *The Leprechaun Cartoon Monthly* in 1912



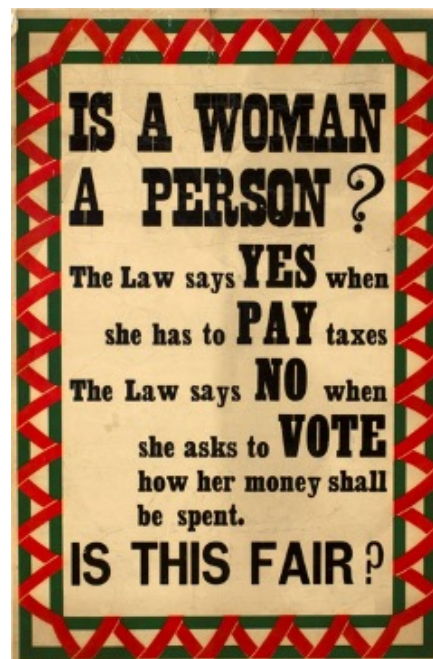
■ Class Discussion

1. In your opinion, what contemporary events and/or organisations inspired the writer of the text?
2. In your opinion, did the writer agree or disagree with votes for women? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
3. As a class, discuss the meaning of satire. Is this rhyme an example of satire?
4. What are the advantages and challenges of using a rhyme as a primary source?

B. Poster

(Courtesy of the Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science.)

1. In your own words, explain the message of this poster.



C. Edited extracts from a report which featured in the Sunday Independent, June 16, 1912.

SUFFRAGISTS HECKLED

Under the auspices of the Irish Women's Franchise League, an open air meeting was held yesterday afternoon in the Nine Acres in Phoenix Park. The suffragettes were subjected to a considerable amount of heckling, and some nasty remarks were used towards them. A section of the crowd that assembled on the shaft side of the lorry from which speeches were delivered made things rather unpleasant for Mr. Sheehy-Skeffington, who was most prominent, and other suffragettes.

Mrs. Cousins, who presided, made a long statement pointing out in anger the absolute rights that women had to vote. A voice shouted, "Go home and mind the baby (loud laughter and cheers).

While Mrs. Palmer was getting on to the lorry there were loud shouts of "Oh! oh" and boos, and a voice, "Have you got any bricks with you!?" Mrs. Palmer said that she had got no bricks with her, as she had used them all up (laughter)....."They came there that day to answer the question as to why they had broken windows in Dublin. They did so to assert their right to votes for women, and bring their claims prominently under the notice of the Government. Home Rule would not be acceptable to the Irish people unless there was a clause in it giving votes to women."

(Mrs. Palmers served as honorary secretary of the IWFL.)

1. Are you familiar with any of the people mentioned in this newspaper article? What do you know about them?
2. How would you describe the attitude of a section of the crowd? How did they regard the suffragettes? Support your answer with evidence from the source.
3. According to Mrs. Palmer, why did the IWFL begin militant action?

■ General Lesson Activities

Discuss

1. How did the IWFL differ from earlier suffrage organisations?
2. What was the title of their newspaper? In your opinion, why did the IWFL produce a newspaper?
3. Identify the motto of the newspaper of the IWFL. In groups, make a list of rights that citizens in Ireland are entitled to and a list of duties that citizens in Ireland have.
4. Using your learning to date, what other national and international issues were happening in the early twentieth century?
5. What was granted in 1918 by The Representation of the People Act? State one important result of this Act.
6. What groups of women were excluded from the Act? Like many of the women who were employed in war service, May Noonan (see the Interactive Timeline) was in her early twenties when the war ended. How might these women have reacted to the conditions of the Act?

■ Pair/Group Work

1. Students

- Individually summarise the main points of this lesson topic in 10 words.
- Swap your work with a classmate. Identify and discuss similarities and differences in your answers.
- Working in pairs or in groups, agree on only 10 words in total. Listen to each other's opinions before making your final choice. Record these words on an Exit Slip and submit them to your teacher.

■ Create

1. Locate each underlined word in this lesson topic.
 - a. Write a definition for each word.
 - b. Create a meaningful sentence using each word.

■ Research

1. Research the life of Margaret Cousins. Decide how to present your findings. Possible ideas:
 - An essay.
 - Bulleted report.
 - Imagine that you are conducting an interview. Make a list of possible questions and use your research to write responses from the perspective of this historical figure.
 - A storyboard to illustrate major events in the life of Margaret Cousins.

■ Further Reading:

The Dictionary of Irish Biography: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington <https://www.dib.ie/biography/skeffington-johanna-hanna-sheehy-a8106> written by Maria Luddy.

Answers from Page 1: a=1884, b=1870, c=1898.