

Prison life and Hungry Strikes for the Women's Suffragettes



As the campaign became increasingly militant, over a thousand Suffragettes, including Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, received prison sentences for their actions. Many Suffragettes were sent to Holloway Prison in North London. Emmeline was imprisoned three times.

Prison life was very harsh for the women. They were treated very badly. Their belongings were all taken away from them and their cells were extremely basic. They didn't even have combs for their hair or soap to wash properly nor books to read like most of other political prisoners.

In fact, the imprisoned women were angry that they were being treated as criminals for demanding their rights. They wanted to be recognised as 'political prisoners', something which the authorities refused to consider. When the leading lights of the suffrage campaign arrived at Holloway Prison, they would be put in the prison hospital, to keep them away from the hundreds of other Suffragettes already imprisoned. Behaviour would spread between prisoners, so if one smashed a window to improve the ventilation, the others would as well.

In response, in 1909, imprisoned suffragettes began to refuse food, a strategy known as a 'hunger strike'. Marion Wallace Dunlop of the WSPU became the first imprisoned suffragette to go on hunger strike, refusing all food. Many others would follow.

Hunger Strikes

The government didn't want any imprisoned protestor to starve to death whilst in their prisons. Many of the prisoners were from upper class families and the government was keen to avoid bad publicity. Rather than considering the suffragette's demands and acting on them, the government instead, started to use force feeding methods on the hunger strikers.



Prison officers poured liquid food straight down their throat and into their stomach through a tube which they inserted either down the hunger strikers throat or nose. As you would expect, forced feeding caused many injuries and traumas to the struggling suffragettes - bleeding, broken teeth, vomiting, and choking as food was poured into the lungs. It was a tortuous process. One woman, Marion Roe was forced fed over 200 times.

Cat and Mouse Act 1913

Most of the public saw the forced feeding as an inhumane act and sympathy for the suffrage movement grew as a result. In response to this outcry of support for the strikers, the government released a new law called the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act to prevent hunger strikers dying whilst in prison. The act stated that strikers would be released until they regained their strength, after which they would be imprisoned again to carry out the rest of their prison sentence.

This created a traumatic cycle for striking suffragettes. They were released to recover from the illness caused by striking injuries, after which they were rearrested and taken back to prison where they restarted their hunger strikes again. As a result, the act soon became known as the Cat and Mouse Act. However, many released suffragettes hid from the police when recovering so that they could not be rearrested.

Did the Suffragettes seek to publicity from their imprisonment?

When the British public first learnt what was going on inside Holloway prison there was a lot of mixed feeling. You had up to 200 suffragettes being admitted on a single day. These were often educated women, some with influential friends. They were clearly documenting what was going on, they hoarded their arrest warrants, smuggled out letters, kept secret diaries. When they were released, they would be greeted with cheering crowds and given a medal, the Holloway brooch. Sometimes they would give interviews to journalists on the day of their release. They didn't just promote the cause of suffrage, but also wanted to make things better for the women imprisoned in Holloway.

Holloway was based on the separate and silent system: you were isolated in your cell, and no-one was supposed to talk to each other. The Suffragettes started defying prison

discipline and making constant complaints and demands. At first the suffragettes looked at penal reform as distracting from their core purpose of getting the vote. Then these campaigning women would go to the prison chapel and see 16-year-old girls and ask, why are they here?