

The film *Suffragette* was released in October 2015; some 100 years since the suffragette movement. Director Sarah Gavron said, "I'd been really interested in the suffragette movement, and wanted to tell that story, which is an untold story." (Puchko, 2015). Gavron's approach was through working class Maude's experiences not only within the home but also her choice to join the suffragette movement and subsequent losses suffered as a result. The extreme tactics of the suffragette movement of the early 20th century was a culmination of decades of peaceful campaigns that were ignored by the patriarchal view of women's weakness and inability to deal with matters beyond domesticity. "If we allow women to vote it will mean the loss of social structure" and "Once the vote was given it would be impossible to stop at this" (*Suffragette*, 2015, 1m15s), spoken with an authority that conveyed with a surety that this was an absolute truth about women. Although it could also be interpreted as a fear by the men of a disturbance of the control they enjoyed. A dynamic that had evolved and been enjoyed by men for hundreds of years. This lack of sovereignty motivated women to no longer accept their situation and conditions which gave rise to the suffragette movement. The women's lack of freedom is evident throughout the film and their treatment at the hands of the men is barbaric.

Gavron's perspective is through the experiences of working class Maud which takes the viewer through her life within her home, her work, and her interactions with the law. Taking this perspective gives the viewer an insight into the harsh reality of the experiences of the working class as opposed to the wealthy who suffered their own injustices which were minor in comparison to the working class who, like the character Maud, stood to lose much more. Even with a predominantly female cast, there is an overarching sense of male oppression, suppression, and dominance throughout the film. The scenes involving the inspector and the politicians were vague and it felt that there should have been more of a dialogue to really understand what their aims were. Prior to the early 20th century snapshot of the experience of women as depicted in the film, is that women had for hundreds of years been treated as inferior. Their basic human rights were gradually removed until they were more of a commodity rather than a person in their own right. By the time of the suffragette movement "They could not own property, could not vote, did not have legal rights to their children, [...] and were generally controlled by their husbands," (Maddock, 2022). This was true of Maud who began to realise how little dominion she had over her own life when she realises that she

cannot be an activist and continue to be accepted within her home and her community. Her husband Sonny initially pleads with her to give up her involvement, but Maud is unable to do so being of the belief that if she does nothing then future generations will suffer the same. Sonny suffers a backlash from within the community and suffers criticism on his lack of control of his wife from his work mates. His community shun him including the withdrawal of the babysitter for George. Sonny later exercises his power as head of the family by putting their son George up for adoption. Maud has no say, "George is mine!" she says but Sonny reminds her "the law says he's mine Maud. Where he belongs is up to me," (Suffragette, 2015, 58m 15s). The role of Sonny appears as one of a mildly long suffering husband but who would not challenge the male dominated powers of the social structure but rather maintain the status quo to avoid any trouble. Further evidence of male dominance is when Violet Miller appears, having suffered physical abuse and sexual assault at the hands of her husband without recourse to justice. There were many, both men and women, who would rather keep within the confines of the social structure regardless of their treatment, than challenge for a better quality of life. Similarly, there were both men and women who recognised the unfairness of the structure and banded to fight the suffragette cause.

Maud, by the age of seven was already working in the laundry. It is implied that Mr Taylor, her employer, has sexually assaulted her in her younger years and is currently doing the same to Violet's daughter Maggie. It is accepted that this is the way things are and no one challenges him. He is a harsh and strict man, with strict standards and expectations. No-one dares cross him except Violet Miller, a protagonist who pushes the boundaries but who eventually gets fired because of her deep involvement with the cause. Women were also paid lower wages than men and were made to work longer hours. They gave their pay to their husbands. Conversely, Edith New's husband Hugh Ellyn was a sympathiser and supported his wife in the cause. There were many men who were sympathetic to the feminist cause with societies such as "The Men's League for Women's Suffrage," "The Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement," and "Men's Committee for Justice to Women" which "was founded in 1909 after the Women's Freedom League deputation to parliament was arrested and imprisoned." (The National Archives, 2023). The men exercised their right to vote on behalf of the women's cause. The film could have portrayed a more balanced view of the support women received from men from various parts of society.

The peaceful, decades long, suffrage campaign by women replaced by the militant campaigns of the early 20th century. The film picks up the campaign at this point showing that the women were not willing to back down in their fight for the vote. What was disturbing in the film was the depiction of the lengths to which the authorities went in order to curb the women from getting the vote. The street protest scenes showing the women's treatment at the hands of the law were shocking. Such uncalled for brutality was difficult to fathom. the women were treated as criminals rather than the political prisoners that they were. Interestingly Mrs Haughton who was the MP's wife and who had her own money, still had no say in how she spent it. Her husband refused to allow her to bail the other women who had been jailed alongside her. This was a portrayal of the stark divide between the wealthy and the poor. The wealthy were able to bail themselves out and furthermore were to receive privileges that starkly contrasted with the treatment of the working class.

It would be difficult to please everyone in the film content, but Gavron succeeds in giving the viewer a feel for the oppressive environment that women lived in and the sheer difficulty in making their voices heard in a patriarchal society in which they had no say in creating. The difficulty the women had in getting their voices heard is conveyed well by the militant action taken and the deep resistance they faced against the patriarchal system. Gavron chose the right perspective for the film as quite often it is the top level of society that tend to get represented in history and the "foot soldiers" tend to be forgotten as the ones who would have suffered the most in the cause but are much needed to highlight the severity of the cause. It may seem to the viewer the futility of the involvement of the working class since at that time, especially to those who were not sympathisers to the cause, that the working class had nothing to gain. But for those who took part the recognition was not in the immediate gain for themselves but for their future generations to come. The quality of the film itself was dark. Although this may have been the quality from the source it was viewed since a search on YouTube that has a lengthy clip has a better quality of picture. The dark ambience of the film gave it a bleak and depressing feel. However, after watching the clip, which was of extremely better quality, the film might not have had as much of a depressing overtone to it. The actors all gave convincing performances although it felt that role of Emiline Pankhurst, played by Meryl Streep was more of an afterthought. Even though Maud's character was a composite of Gavron's findings in her research, she was convincingly played by Carey Mulligan

although at the beginning it felt that she was unwillingly drawn into the cause but later she convincingly showed enthusiasm and belief as she has a conversation with her husband about the future of a daughter should they have had one to the realisation that future generations will suffer the same if she doesn't join the cause.

One hundred years on from the feminist fight for equal rights see the fight continue. Within the film *Maud*, sitting in front of David Lloyd George, states her pay at his request, "we get 13 shillings a week, sir. For a man, it's 19 and we work a third more the hours." Today women are still fighting for the right to equal pay. Around the world, women continue to fight for their human rights and equality. Some are rescinding women's rights, such as in the USA - "Parts of the US are legislating to ensure that women can no longer have a legal abortion," and "In Afghanistan, the Taliban once again prowl the streets more concerned with keeping women at home and in strict dress code than with the impending collapse of the country into famine." (Mace, 2022)

Having not had previous knowledge of the suffragette movement of the early 1900s, the film gave me a good insight into the experiences and difficulties for women at the time. It was shocking to learn of their lifestyles and the hardships they had to endure including their rights and freedom within the home. It is hard to imagine living without these freedoms today but were it not for these brave women we might not be enjoying such lifestyles. There are those that want to maintain the status quo and those that want to rock the world to achieve equal rights for all. For me it is all about personal freedom. The freedom as an individual to make one's own choices within a set of parameters that serves all. The Suffragettes were about fighting a cause on behalf of women to enjoy the choices and freedoms that men do. A fight they successfully fought but which, despite the great progress made in the world today, women are still not on equal par with men. There are many around the world who continue to fight for various rights and causes without whom we would not be living in a freer society. There are still top male powers who relish who relish wielding control not only on women but on all of society. Ultimately, it has been a springboard towards fighting the cause against further infringements of women's rights which over time will eradicate unfairness and restore the equalities that all should enjoy not just a few.

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