The Suffragettes

Until the last century women did not have the same rights as men in the western world. For example, they could not vote or go to school. They were always subject to a male figure of the family (their fathers, brothers or some other male relative) and had to accept their choices. Their possessions usually belonged to their husbands. Sometimes they were not free to work and to choose their religion.

In ancient Rome a wife was her husband’s property and she could not do anything according to her own wishes. Between 610 and 661, thanks to reforms that gave women some rights regarding inheritance, marriage and divorce, the status of women improved, but it was only centuries later that women were given similar legal status in other cultures, because a patriarchal order was believed to be the most natural.

At the beginning of the 20th century more and more women started to think that this was not fair and wanted change. The legal right of women to vote in the United States of America was established nationally in 1920.

In 1903 British women from all social classes (called suffragettes by the newspapers) started a political group called ‘The Women’s Social and Political Union’. Their leader was Emmeline Pankhurst and they fought for ‘Women’s rights’ (the right of women to be equal to men) and the right to vote (their nickname came from the word ‘suffrage’, which means ‘the right to vote’). In the beginning their methods were peaceful.

They wrote letters and sent petitions to Parliament, but there were not successful, so they started using other methods: they chained themselves to fences, organised attacks on shops and art galleries and set fire to letter boxes. For this reason many of them were arrested between 1908 and 1913. While in prison, they considered themselves political prisoners and went on hunger strikes. At the beginning of World War I, they stopped doing this and began to do some jobs that only men had done before. As a consequence, British women (but only rich, married women over 30 years of age) were allowed to vote in political elections for the first time in 1918. It was not until 1928 that all women in Britain were allowed to vote.
In the 1960s this movement was called ‘feminism’ and women demanded the same pay as men, equal rights in law and the freedom to plan their families. The first British Sex Discrimination Act, an Equal Pay Act and an Equal Opportunities Commission came into force in 1975 and after that the UK Government persuaded other countries to guarantee that discrimination laws would be abolished in the European Community. Today women in many countries still continue to campaign for the same rights as men.

Questionnaire
1 Read the text about the Suffragettes and the movement for women’s rights. Answer the questions.
   1 Were women free to work and to choose their religion in the past?
   2 What happened between 610 and 661 in ancient Rome?
   3 What did the suffragettes fight for?
   4 Who was Emmeline Pankhurst?
   5 When did American women obtain the right to vote?
   6 Were all British women allowed to vote in 1918?
   7 What was this movement called in the 1960s?
   8 When could all British women vote?
   9 Can all women in the world vote nowadays, in all countries?
  10 What do you think the people who cannot vote should do? Why?

Summary Writing
2 Prepare a brief summary about women’s rights. Remember to include the following information.
   • the position of women in the past
   • the beginning of the fight for women’s rights
   • what happened during and after World War I
   • women and their rights today