

Movie discussion resource **The Suffragette (2015)**
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: British drama, biography, drama, history

Rating: PG13 (violence, brief strong language, partial nudity)

Length: 1 hour 46 minutes

Starring Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep, Helena Bonham Carter



Brief synopsis

In early 20th-century Britain, the growing suffragette movement forever changes the life of working wife and mother Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan). Galvanized by political activist Emmeline Pankhurst (Meryl Streep), Watts joins a diverse group of women fighting for equality and the right to vote. In the face of police action, Maud and the suffragettes play a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse, risking their jobs, homes, family and lives for a just cause.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might be enough to reflect on/discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own story/experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ What biblical or theological themes or characters come to mind that engage with the story?

The following provides some particular aspects of the movie that could be explored. Please note this is a catalyst for discussion, not a review. There has been criticism that the script has filtered out the contextual complexities of politics, and the direction reduces difficult situations to simple sentiments (Richard Brody, The New Yorker). However, there is plenty to discuss from the movie!

‘Dreams’

Maud is given a book, *Dreams in a Desert*, by Olive Schreiner. On the inside page, there are names of women involved in the suffragette movement, as the book is passed from one woman to another, to fuel their imagination and to sustain their commitment. She reads, “*The woman wanderer goes forth on the path towards freedom.*” She wonders, “*I am alone, utterly alone. Why do I go to this far land?*” And reason says to her, “*Silence, what do you hear? Thousands, and they beat this way. . . Feet of those who follow you. Lead on.*” Discuss this quote in the context of movements of social change, and particularly the notion that even an ordinary ‘foot soldier’ may be a leader with the potential to inspire others.

Domestic terrorism?

The women used their own bodies as weapons of resistance. They also blew up post boxes, smashed windows, destroyed communication networks, carried out arson - predicated on the confidence that ‘there’s another way of living this life’. Is violence justified because it is the language those in power understand? Could social change to address institutionalised gender discrimination have been achieved by peaceful means? How would this violence be viewed through the lens of ‘anti-terror’ laws? What are contemporary examples of civil disobedience e.g. action in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, war, the environment, and working for justice? ‘Good ends are sometimes reached by bad means, but that’s no reason to celebrate the means. Rather we should mourn that some had to resort to bad means to achieve the good ends that should have been theirs all along’. (The non-violence of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr would come decades later in the 20th century. The courage of Malala in advocating for change through peaceful means would not come until a century later). Discuss.

Media

Media was used by the police and politicians to shame the suffragettes. The suffragettes too learned the power of media. This is demonstrated most starkly at the Epsom races, where two of the women plan to use the presence of the media to attract attention to their cause. Film technology was in its early days, but the incident on the racecourse was captured on 3 newsreel cameras and raised the profile of the women's campaign for change. How is media used, and misused, by people on all sides of social change, protest and dissent? Discuss.

Time for change - or the long slow drift to change?

The specific focus of the suffragettes for the right to vote was only part of the story, with women still disadvantaged and diminished in many areas e.g. sexism, 'honour killings', rape, domestic violence against women, pay inequity, exclusion of women from leadership in some church traditions. There is still such a long way to go to improve their conditions and gain equity, and requires ongoing change to address the complex issues involved. How do you see the dynamics of direct action for social change through the cycle of unrest, upheaval, change and stability? What role does media play in change, and social media with instant methods of alerting people to decisions on strategy for gatherings and actions?

Tessa Hadley: 'Historians these days tend to attribute the eventual achievement of women's suffrage to the significant role they played in the war economy, and to the longer, slower attrition of the constitutional suffragists, who didn't engage in direct action. And then the slow tides of economic and social change, moving through the 20th century, brought by so many more women in the workforce'.

Is the long slow drift towards change something that is inevitable and 'reasonable', or is direct action needed in a world that increasingly thrives on the inequities of people. Discuss.

Foot soldiers

The film's main focus is on ordinary people drawn into action for social change, changing history. They are denigrated as 'foot soldiers' (fodder for a cause). Yet social change requires a movement of people, not just charismatic individuals. Rosa Parks was a member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and only one of many who were arrested for not giving up their bus seats. Martin Luther King Jr was the hesitant champion of highly orchestrated NAACP civil disobedience campaigns. The Arab Spring that began in 2010 spread rapidly through the Middle East and north Africa region with millions involved. Discuss the role of 'foot soldiers' in a movement.

Ripe for the picking

Maud's personal history (didn't know father, mother died when she was 4, she worked in a laundry from 7 years old, workplace intimidation etc) made her more responsive to the suffragette movement. In a contemporary setting, there are social, economic and political conditions that make individuals, groups and communities 'ripe for the picking', and sometimes recruited into terror networks. Discuss.

Votes for women

The world has changed for the better in the past century, although 'the project of feminist advancement is radically incomplete' (*Jacqueline Rose*). The new Canadian PM Justin Trudeau has a Cabinet of equal parts men and women. 'It's an incredible pleasure for me... to present a cabinet that looks like Canada'. When asked why he had a gender-equal cabinet he replied simply, 'because it's 2015'. The film's credits list the dates when women were given the vote - starting with New Zealand and Australia (SA being the first State to do so). Some countries took much longer (eg Switzerland, 1971). Discuss how women are represented in leadership.

Prophetic imagination (*Walter Brueggemann. The Prophetic Imagination, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001*)

Brueggemann names lament and grief, and a deep awareness of the plight of the poor and oppressed, as the starting point for social change, that then requires an engagement of the prophetic imagination in anticipation of what God will do to generate newness. Discuss.

Rev Sandy Boyce 6th January 2016 Pilgrim Uniting Church, www.pilgrim.org.au

This resource is freely available to download and copy but kindly attribute the source.