

# Cultural Daily

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## Suffragette – The Early Feminists

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, October 29th, 2015

The movie *Suffragette*, written by Abi Morgan, directed by Sarah Gavron, starring Carey Mulligan, Helena Bonham Carter, Anne-Marie Duff, Romola Garai and Meryl Streep, offers new insight into the history of the [first-wave feminist movement](#) in England, that eventually resulted in women earning the right to vote (suffrage) in 1928.

The screenwriter explains that, through the six years that it took to get this film made, she wrote several drafts, settling on telling the story from the point of view of a working class woman, rather than an upper class lady. Mulligan portrays a married young mother, exploited by her abusive boss in an industrial laundry, who becomes involved in the [Women Social and Political Union](#). She is interrogated by a sympathetic inspector (Brendan Gleeson), who tries to convince her to become a spy for the police, she is arrested and thrown in jail; when she's released, her loving husband (Ben Whishaw) kicks her out of the house and forbids her to see their young son.

It was Mulligan's mother's idea to ask Meryl Streep to portray [Emmeline Pankurst](#), the charismatic leader of the WSPU, who only appears in a short scene. An advocate for women's rights, Streep accepted and became a big supporter of the production. She obviously trusted Morgan, who had written the biopic *Iron Lady* (2011), where she played Margaret Thatcher.

[The Women Suffrage movement](#) had started in England in 1870, but the film focuses on the years 1912 and 1913, and subverts the popular notion that suffragettes, a term of derision coined by the press, were society ladies in long skirts and wide-brimmed hats who drank tea and marched politely holding banners. After decades of peaceful protest, by 1903 the suffragists had become militant activists dedicated to civil disobedience. They shattered shop windows, put molotov cocktails inside mailboxes, destroyed property, but without endangering human lives. They were sent to prison, went on hunger strikes and were force-fed, a practice that today is considered a form of torture, when employed against prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. The victory of 1928 was not only about the right to vote for women, the director says, but also about parental rights over their own children, or the right of not being fired if they became pregnant.

Morgan hopes that other filmmakers will be inspired to tell the story of the [campaign for women suffrage in the United States](#), which was rooted in the Abolitionist movement, had started in 1848, led by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ida Wells, and eventually resulted in the [19th amendment](#) to the Constitution in 1920. Part of that story has been told in the 2004 HBO-TV movie, *Iron Jawed Angels*, focusing on Alice Paul (Hilary Swank) and Lucy Burns (Frances O'Connor), who had met in England while participating in the radical WSPU lead by Emmeline

Pankhurst.

At the end of the movie *Suffragette*, a crawl lists the dates when women earned the right to vote in various countries. A surprise is 1971 for civilized Switzerland. 2015 is the last country, Saudi Arabia, where women are still not allowed to vote (or drive a car).

Mulligan cites the statistics that 62 million girls around the world are denied an education, and one in three women experience sexual violence, which proves the point that young women (and men) today should not take for granted the battles that their grandmothers fought a century ago, and their mothers 50 years ago, during the [second-wave Women's Liberation movement](#) led by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. In many countries they are now free to exercise their right to vote, get an education, have choice over their own bodies; so they can proudly call themselves [third-wave feminists](#), and wage a fight for equality worldwide, for women (and men) of different races, social classes, religions, sexual orientation and gender identity.



Helena Bonham-Carter, Carey Mulligan-*Suffragette*. (c) Steffan Hill/Focus Features

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