



Celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage in the US

Level B1

29 Settembre 2020

2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the women's right to vote in the United States. When the US was founded, voting was limited; in most American states only men with property could vote. Eventually, all men obtained the right to vote, but women were still excluded. They were considered unfit or, even, too stupid to vote. Many women fought against these prejudices. They founded women's activist groups. They organized conventions. The one held at Seneca Falls in 1848 produced a 'Declaration of Sentiments' that contained a list of grievances aimed at the American government. The lack of women's suffrage was the first grievance. Indeed, the struggle was not just about the right to vote. Activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton even said that "I wasn't ready to vote, didn't want to vote, but I did want equal pay for equal work."



Enemies of women's suffrage

Not all women were in favour of universal suffrage. There were anti-suffrage women groups that said that politics was a dirty business and women should not get involved. Also, they felt that women acting like men would destroy the family and promote socialism. These women were usually white and upper class; they were afraid that giving rights to the poor (men and women alike) would lead to the loss of their privileges. Others opposed to women's suffrage included many brewers and distillers. They felt that if women could vote, they would make alcoholic drinks illegal. This is because the women's movements fought many battles to improve society, and one of these was the fight against alcoholism. Some industrialists were also against women's suffrage, because they believed (rightly so) that women would support the abolition of child labour.

The Nineteenth Amendment

In 1890 the National American Woman Suffrage Association was founded. It protested "against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded." Things changed radically when the US entered World War I in 1917. Many men were called to arms and had to leave their workplaces. Thousands of women substituted them in factories and offices to keep the nation going. In 1918 President Woodrow Wilson declared: "We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the American Constitution was passed, granting universal suffrage. The US joined the other nations that had already granted women the right to vote. To name a couple, New Zealand had done so in 1893, Australia in 1902. In other nations, instead, women had to keep fighting, sometimes for many more decades.

Gender-inclusive language and social activism

What made this struggle so long and hard? Many aspects of American society favour men politically, economically and culturally. This was (and is) the case with many other societies. Even languages can have a male bias. To ease this problem, the European Parliament issued guidelines to change those terms that are “discriminatory because they are only used in the masculine.” Better to say ‘chairperson’ than ‘chairman’ (or ‘chairwoman’). Better ‘humanity’ than ‘mankind’, ‘principal’ than ‘headmaster’, ‘police officer’ than ‘policeman’, ‘artificial’ than ‘man-made’. The United Nations also has guidelines favouring gender-inclusive language and discouraging discriminatory expressions (towards both women *and* men) such as ‘Oh, that’s women’s work’, or ‘Men just don’t understand’. The fight of women for the right to vote proved, once again, that progressive political reforms are often determined by popular pressure. They are obtained not because politicians propose them, but because millions of people demand them.

USEFUL LINKS

1) Would you like to read the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’ of the Seneca Falls convention?

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Sentiments [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Sentiments]

2) Watch this video on the history of the Women’s suffrage movement, from the writing of the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’ to the signing of the Nineteenth Amendment. Pay attention to the end of the video: who was still not allowed to vote in 1920?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9LmBgY-F5A> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9LmBgY-F5A]

3) Here are 10 reasons why some members of Parliament were opposed to women voting in the UK:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43740033> [https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43740033]

4) Did you know that the bicycle was an incredible ally for the women’s movement? Check out this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPLJgkVsXpE&list=PLeQM5rWQV5hsco9-ZT3z23nxx3F1DzBIG&index=20&t=0s>
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPLJgkVsXpE&list=PLeQM5rWQV5hsco9-ZT3z23nxx3F1DzBIG&index=20&t=0s]

5) What is gender neutral language and why should we use it? This is what the EU has to say:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf]

6) Here are the UN guidelines for gender-inclusive language:

<https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml> [https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml]

COMPREHENSION

1) Read the article and cross out the WRONG alternative (two answers are correct and one is incorrect).

1. When the US was founded

- a. all men could vote.
- b. rich men could vote.
- c. women could not vote.

2. The women’s activist groups fought

- a. for the right to vote.
- b. against the American government.
- c. to obtain equal rights also in the workplace.

3. The women who opposed universal suffrage

- a. feared that poor people (women and men) would vote socialist.
- b. believed women should tend the family and not get involved in public business.
- c. were usually poor, Caucasian women.

4. People who opposed women’s right to vote were

- a. people who made whisky, beer and other alcoholic drinks.
- b. the socialists.
- c. industrialists who used child labour.

5. World War I was

- a. an unlikely ally of the women's movement.
- b. the reason why many women entered the workforce.
- c. an obstacle for the women's movement.

6. In 1918 President Woodrow Wilson felt that women

- a. took part in the "suffering" and the "toil" of the war effort.
- b. should be allowed to participate in the war effort.
- c. deserved equal rights and privileges.

7. The United States

- a. was the first nation to grant the vote to women.
- b. granted universal suffrage 27 years after New Zealand.
- c. amended the American Constitution to allow women to vote.

8. The women's movement fought a long, hard struggle because

- a. the political organization of the United States favoured men.
- b. American society discriminated against women.
- c. they had to use a language that is biased towards men.

9. The EU and UN institutions believe that language

- a. should be gender-biased.
- b. should not be discriminatory.
- c. should be gender-inclusive.

10. The EU and the UN believe that language

- a. can discriminate against women.
- b. can discriminate against both men and women.
- c. only discriminates against men.

VOCABULARY

2) Complete the sentences with the following words. Put the verbs and nouns in the right form, if necessary.

unfit * grievance * suffrage * to toil * to declare * struggle * brewer * distiller * to grant * bias

- 1. This was very hard work! I _____ in the field for ten hours, picking tomatoes.
- 2. The right to vote is called _____.
- 3. She spoke publicly and solemnly, _____ that every adult has the right to vote.
- 4. He doesn't know languages very well, so he is _____ to work as a translator.
- 5. _____ make spirits such as whisky, while _____ make beer.
- 6. A synonym for _____ is 'complaint'.
- 7. If enough people demand a reform, politicians may _____ it.
- 8. You are not impartial: you have a strong _____ in favour of one side of the argument.
- 9. I think that life is very hard. It's an uphill _____!

GRAMMAR - Subordinating conjunctions

3) Choose the correct subordinating conjunction to complete the following sentences.

[\[https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml\]](https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml)

- 1. _____ (Before/After/Until) the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, women were allowed to vote.
- 2. Some women were against universal suffrage _____ (if/because/when) they were afraid to lose their privileges.
- 3. _____ (While /Until/When) World War I began, women moved into many men's workplaces.
- 4. _____ (Because/If/Unless) all adults are allowed to vote, a society is considered democratic.
- 5. In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton didn't want to vote _____ (so that/that/because) she wasn't ready.
- 6. The EU decided _____ (when/that/where) language needs to be gender-inclusive.

7. _____ (If/Whenever/ Wherever) you use the term 'mankind' instead of 'humanity', you are using gender-biased language.
8. I get very upset and ready to fight _____ (while/whenever/until) I see injustice.
9. _____ (That/So/Since) you don't respect me, I prefer not to talk to you.
10. You should say 'firefighter' _____ (rather than/as much as/whether) 'fireman'.

SHORT ESSAY

4) Why do you think it is important to vote? What do you think you need to do to be a responsible voter? (60-80 words)

[<https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml>]

5) Do you think women are still discriminated against in our society? Is there discrimination against other groups of people? Write down your thoughts on the subject and support them with a couple of examples. (60-80 words)

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(Carlo Dellonte)

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TAG discrimination, gender neutral, go, Goal 10 - Reduced Inequality, Goal 4 - Quality Education, Goal 5 - Gender Equality, language, Obiettivo 4 - Istruzione di qualità, Obiettivo 5 - Parità di genere, suffragette, vote, women