



Emmeline Pankhurst (née Goulden; 1858-1928) was one of the most influential leaders of the British suffragette movement. Born in Moss Side, Manchester, Emmeline got involved in the fight for suffrage early in life. She married the barrister Richard Pankhurst at the age of 21. Richard was a strong supporter of women's right to vote and in favour of his wife's political activities. The couple had five children, including Christabel, Sylvia and Adela Pankhurst, who would also take active part in the women's movement. In 1903, three years after the death of her husband, Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The organisation was radical in calling for immediate political action and focusing exclusively on the votes for women campaign.

It was infamous due to its militant tactics, which included civil disobedience, hunger strikes and arson. From 1908 onwards, Pankhurst was arrested several times. She served a number of prison sentences, which she used to gain further publicity for the suffragette movement. In 1909, she famously forced a confrontation with a police officer, striking him in the face repeatedly to ensure that she would be arrested.

In 1910, when Pankhurst was 52 years old, she met lesbian composer Ethel Smyth, who was exactly the same age. Smyth was soon converted to the women's movement, and the two women entered into an intimate relationship. They served time together in Holloway Prison, where they were assigned adjoining cells and sometimes shared a cell overnight. Ethel composed the suffrage anthem "The March of Women", which was first performed in 1911, and dedicated it to Pankhurst. Smyth's and Pankhurst's relationship raises central questions about bisexual and feminist history: do we need direct evidence of sexual relations between women – of which there is none regarding Smyth and Pankhurst – to include a woman like Pankhurst within bisexual history? How do we read the often incredibly close relationships between women, including older women like Pankhurst who formed intimate bonds with other women after the end of a heterosexual marriage? Why have historians and biographers often shied away from acknowledging same-sex relationships between women within the early women's movement, despite some concrete evidence detailing relationships between bisexual and lesbian suffragettes?

In 1913, the increasing tensions between the WSPU and other feminist organisations led to internal divisions, and core members, including Adela and Sylvia Pankhurst, decided to leave the Union. Emmeline continued to work with Christabel, who had begun to lead the organisation at this point. With the outbreak of the First World War, Emmeline and Christabel began to support the British government and called for an end of militant suffragette action. In 1918, partial suffrage was won, when the Representation of the People Act granted votes to all men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 30. In the 1920s, during the final decade of her life, Pankhurst distanced herself further from her earlier militant and radical anti-establishment politics: she continued to defend a nationalist and imperial vision for Britain, rejected Bolshevism, and, in 1926, joined the Conservative Party. Even during this time, however, she remained firmly committed to women's empowerment and continued to fight for equal rights between men and women. Pankhurst died in 1928, only a few weeks before full suffrage was won in Britain.

Dr Jana Funke - Advanced Research Fellow in Medical Humanities, Department of English, University of Exeter



Faces of 2017: Emmeline Pankhurst



Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans
History Month