

1880-1936

Conquering citizenship

The figure of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* has never stopped multiplying into many avatars. It seems quite paradoxical: at the exact moment when Marianne dashes forward with the wind blowing in her hair and proudly brandishes the French flag, women do not have any political representation; they are considered inferior and do not have access to citizenship. The suffragists' protests in France – though not as large and visible as those in the United States or the United Kingdom – play a key role in the history of French feminism and in the conquest of women's rights. From the end of the 19th century, feminist activists, inspired by waves of international claims, hold rallies for civil rights. On 14 July 1881, Hubertine Auclert calls for women to "take the Bastille." These early protests appear in the form of public meetings, petitions and awareness campaigns, even if it is still difficult to take to the streets. Few are those who venture to do it, among them Madeleine Pelletier or Louise Weiss. The road to citizenship is full of pitfalls caused by the senators' bitter opposition: a majority considering that women are not rational enough or educated enough to participate in the political life. In such a context, demonstrations are an opportunity to show the risks taken, the engaged body, the repression and the arrests.

Demands for equality

1882: for the first time, the word "feminist" emerges with the same meaning as today's. Suffragist Hubertine Auclert is the one who coins it and gives it its subversive power. But feminists hesitate to take to the streets. They sneak in small gatherings here and there, or in organisations of illegal outdoor votes, and join in a march in Paris on 5 July 1914 where between 2,000 and 6,000 people gather. Women demand not only the right to vote, but also full citizenship. However, these enterprises remain small in comparison with the big suffragist processions in Great Britain and the United States.

A British model?

As for the British suffragettes, they demonstrate en masse, practising civil disobedience, putting themselves in danger, risking their bodies: exposed, abused and tortured bodies. In comparison to France, the participation rate in the protests is surreal: in London, on 21 June 1908, 500,000 people converge to Hyde Park to claim for universal suffrage. The artists' mobilisation gives birth to impressive marches. Symbolic colours are raised everywhere: green for hope, white for purity and violet for dignity: Green White Violet – Give Women Votes.

Across the Atlantic

The suffragists' demonstrations in the United States are marked by determined actions as well. The movement grows bigger from the 1840s, with emblematic figures such as Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention marks a turning point: its women-participants claim that the right to vote is essential to equality. In the 1910s, spectacular demonstrations, such as the Women Suffrage Procession in Washington D.C., draw national attention as well as worldwide solidarity. These actions help to exert pressure on the Congress, finally leading to the adoption of the 19th amendment in 1920.

Tenacity in the post-war years

“French women want to vote but the Senate does not want them to.” Indeed, the upper chamber systematically refuses to give women the right to vote. In France, feminists become bolder: they are more willing to take to the streets. The gatherings are multiplying, though most of the time they are repressed and lead to arrests. Some of the feminists go all over the streets in buses or in cars, with their banners and their signs, their pamphlets and their placards. Others cross the country to lead a joyful yet intensive propaganda. Their initiatives become more and more original.