

# Laws affecting women



In the early years of the twentieth century, women in the UK did not have 'suffrage' – the right to vote in elections. Emmeline Pankhurst led the 'Suffragettes' in campaigning for women to be given the vote and have the same rights as men. Here is an extract from a speech that she gave in March 1908.

Men politicians are in the habit of talking to women as if there were no laws that affect women. "The fact is," they say, "the home is the place for women. Their interests are the rearing and training of children. These are the things that interest women. Politics have nothing to do with these things, and therefore politics do not concern women." Yet the laws decide how women are to live in marriage, how their children are to be trained and educated, and what the future of their children is to be. All that is decided by Act of Parliament. Let us take a few of these laws, and see what there is to say about them from the women's point of view.

First of all, let us take the marriage laws. They are made by men for women. Let us consider whether they are equal, whether they are just, whether they are wise. What security of maintenance has the married woman? Many a married woman having given up her economic independence in order to marry, how is she compensated for that loss? What security does she get in that marriage for which she gave up economic independence? Take the case of a woman who has been earning a good income. She is told that she ought to give up her employment when she becomes a wife and a mother. What does she get in return? All that a married man is obliged by law to do for his wife is to provide for her shelter of some kind, food of some kind, and clothing of some kind. It is left to his good pleasure to decide what the shelter shall be, what the food shall be, what the clothing shall be. It is left to him to decide what money shall be spent on the home, and how it shall be spent; the wife has no voice legally in deciding any of these things. She has no legal claim upon any definite portion of his income. If he is a good man, a conscientious man, he does the right thing. If he is not, if he chooses almost to starve his wife, she has no remedy. What he thinks sufficient is what she has to be content with.

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928)

1 What is the name for a person's right to vote?

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2 What, according to Emmeline Pankhurst, did men politicians think were women's interests and concerns?

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3 If a woman 'gives up her economic independence' what does she lose control of?

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4 Which phrase or sentence suggests that women were not expected to work after they married?

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5 By law, what **three** things did a husband have to provide for his wife?

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6 The speaker says of a husband: 'If he is a good man, a conscientious man, he does the right thing.' What might she mean by 'the right thing'?

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7 Find the words in the speech that have these meanings:

a) relating to the law: \_\_\_\_\_

b) enough: \_\_\_\_\_

8 In your own words, sum up the main ideas in the final paragraph.

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1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark


1 mark

1 mark

2 marks



### Further activities

- Read through the text together, ensuring that the children fully understand each line – since Shakespearean language will be unfamiliar to most of them.
- Allocate the parts of Bottom, Quince and Flute to three individuals and ask them to read the scene aloud with expression in their voices, changing the tempo, volume and tone as if they were performing a radio play.
- Discuss why Flute is being asked to play the part of a woman. (Plays were often played either by guilds of workers, or by members of a church community, and members of both these groups tended to be male. Therefore it became a tradition, for a time, for men to play both male and female roles in the theatre.)
- Remind the children of the Roman gods who featured in the story 'How music made peace' on page 34. Explain the phrase 'Phibbus' car' – the chariot of Phoebus, which is the Greek name for the Roman god, Apollo (god of the sun). Invite the children to research the names of other Greek gods, such as Phoebe (Roman god, Artemis): goddess of the moon.
- Invite the children to research 'the Fates' – three mythical figures of Greek legend, sometimes called 'Moirae'. They are three sisters, all robed in white, who decide on human fate. Lachesis speaks of the past, Clotho of the present and Atropos of the future.
-  Group the children in threes and ask them to plan and write a script for the three Fates, as if they were addressing a familiar fictional character, such as Cinderella, Dick Whittington or Little Red Riding Hood. Each in turn will tell the chosen character, respectively, how things were, are now and will be in the future. For example, Lachesis' script could tell Cinderella what a beautiful and much-loved girl she was; Clotho could describe her life since her father remarried; Atropos could warn her to expect a visit from her fairy godmother and advise her to follow her counsel and so become a princess.

## Laws affecting women (Level 5 text)

Contained in: Book 3 (page 38)

Genre: Persuasive text

Author: Emmeline Pankhurst


### Introduction

Assisted by her daughters, Sylvia and Christabel, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (born in Manchester in 1858) led the Women's Suffrage Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her campaign for women's legal rights and equality with men was aided by the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914, forcing women to take on the jobs of men, who were away fighting. When many men lost their lives in the war, the status of women in society was, by default, altered. Use the pointer in the activity book to introduce the text to the children before they start reading.

### Answers

1. 'suffrage' 2. the home, child-rearing 3. *decisions on how money is spent* 4. 'she ought to give up her employment' 5. shelter, food, clothing 6. *allowing women adequate clothes and food and/or control and choice over spending: 'equality'* 7a. 'legal' 7b. 'sufficient' 8. (two forfeited rights and/or responsibilities, such as:) *control over all decisions, including where she lives; money matters, including how and when to spend or save; how she dresses; whether she works; what she eats.*

### Further activities

- Check that the children understand the words 'just', 'security', 'obliged' and 'conscientious'.
-  Ask the children to imagine that they are living 100 years ago and have just