

Women's suffrage: After 100 years since millions of women got the vote around the world, how do their rights compare now?

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Amid a groundswell in sexual harassment claims across Hollywood, Westminster, the City of London and elsewhere, it is with bitter-sweet sentiment that we celebrate this year's centenary of the Representation of the People Act on 6 February.

The legislation granted some women in the UK the right to vote, but while its anniversary serves as a reminder of how far we've come, it should also underscore how much work still lies ahead. April's gender pay gap reporting deadline is perhaps the next important test.

The Act and what it achieved should also not be over-celebrated. While it marked an important beginning of a process, it was in many ways a feeble start. It gave females the right to vote, but only if they were over the age of 30, owned property, were a member or married to a member of the Local Government Register, or were a graduate in a university constituency.

It was restrictive and overly selective. But it did change the face of the electorate dramatically. According to the electoral register of the time, the female proportion shot up to 43 per cent despite those limitations. And, perhaps most significantly, it paved the way for the Equal Franchise Act a decade later: an extension of the Act from 1918, which gave all women over the age of 21 the right to vote – property owners or not.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of that first important milestone, we take a look at how women's rights in the UK have developed since then and how this country stacks up in a global context.

United Kingdom

Despite the political reform of 1918 and 1928 that came as a result of the Suffragette movement led by Emmeline Pankhurst, it took several other pieces of legislation for real social reform to be achieved here in the UK, theoretically granting women rights on par with those enjoyed by men.

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 stipulated that nobody could be disqualified from performing a public function, or from holding a civil or judicial office or post, because of their gender. But it wasn't until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 that women were given the same rights to divorce their husbands as the rights men had to divorce their wives.

And women in the UK had to wait until 1970 for the government to introduce the Equal Pay Act, making it illegal for employers to treat men and women doing an equivalent role differently in terms of pay.

Despite this, pay discrimination is still a widespread concern that institutions such as the BBC have in recent months shone an unflattering light on by publishing the salaries of their highest paid actors and presenters.

In early April this year, all organisations in the country employing at least 250 people will have to publish the gender pay gap of their company for all four quartiles of their workforce.

On paper, women may have all the same judicial rights as men here in the UK, but gender pay gap reporting will undoubtedly provide further evidence that we're still decades off being able to speak about true parity of the sexes.



3 February 1913: American suffragette Rosalie Jones leads protesters up Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington DC (Getty)

Different states granted women the right to vote in the US at different times – starting in 1890 with Wyoming – but in 1920, thanks to the 19th Amendment of the Constitution being ratified, suffrage was rolled out nationally.

In the subsequent decades, a flurry of political groups formed dedicated to individual issues around women's rights. Prominent examples included the League of Women Voters and the National Council of Negro Women.

The National Women's Party, which was founded in 1913, drafted the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923, which stipulated that equality of right under the law shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex. It took until 22 March 1972 – almost half a century later – for the ERA to be passed by Congress and sent to the individual states for ratification.

Last year, on 22 March, Nevada became the 36th state to ratify the ERA.

In 1963, the Equal Pay Act was signed into law by John F Kennedy, aimed at abolishing wage disparity but, as in the UK, a stubborn pay gap remains across the US. In 2016, the gap was still around 20 per cent, despite having narrowed considerably since the 1970s.