



The work of the ELFS was “not merely for votes but towards an egalitarian society – an effort to awaken the women submerged in poverty to struggle for better social conditions and bring them into line with the most advanced sections of the movement of the awakened proletariat” (Sylvia Pankhurst)

In 1914, Sylvia Pankhurst split from the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed by her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel, and started up her own branch of the suffragettes in the East End of London. This branch was called the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) and was established in Old Ford Road, Bow.

Sylvia’s mother and sister did not think that a movement led by working class women would have the necessary clout to win the vote. They felt that middle and upper class women had more power. Sylvia did not agree.

East London Federation of Suffragettes

“...[The East End] was a sort of a focal point for working class activity...and the East London Federation was... very much, um, populated...with...women of the area who had gradually joined and joined and...were convinced of the need for women to have the vote...so what she did...was to campaign for, um, equal pay for women...she did set up.. factories for women to work in because, you know, the poverty in the East End was just...incredible...she gradually...built up a very, very powerful organisation” (Professor Mary Davis)



Sylvia Pankhurst

As well as campaigning for the women’s vote, the ELFS aimed to address issues relevant to working class women. They set up a day nursery and cheap restaurant (part of their campaign against rising food prices) on Old Ford Road; a toy factory in Norman Grove that employed men and women at an equal, living wage and a relief programme providing children with milk.

They employed tactics such as lobbying and mass mobilisation, instead of the single heroic acts favoured by the WSPU – a spell in prison was not something these women could afford, they had families relying on their wage.

The ELFS were not a single issue campaign group; they were a revolution that aimed to change the role of women in society. Even in today’s society there are still issues of inequality, especially in the workplace.



Women working at toy factory run by ELFS, c. 1914 (Image courtesy of Nora Smyth/IISH)