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# A Woman's Weapon: Hunger Strikes and Force Feedings in the British Women's Suffrage Movement, 1903-1917

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A Woman's Weapon: Hunger Strikes and Force Feedings in the British Women's Suffrage

Movement, 1903-1917

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Senior Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

While there is no exact date for when women first began lobbying the British Government for the right to vote, the first sizeable suffrage organizations for women to gain the right to vote began in Manchester, London, and Edinburgh in 1867 (Nelson xi, xxii). In the late 1800s, multiple suffrage organization joined together under the leadership of Millicent Garret Fawcett to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (Nelson xxiii). Dr. Richard Pankhurst, Emmeline Pankhurst's husband, drafted the first, ultimately unsuccessful, women's suffrage bill in 1870. Between 1879 and 1914, there were twenty-eight unsuccessful drafts of women's suffrage bills (Nelson xxii). In 1903, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union, one of the only militant suffrage organizations in England. Mainstream media treated the militant group differently, and referred to them as "suffragettes" rather than "suffragists." "Suffragette" was first used as an insult towards the Women's Social and Political Union in 1906, and was used exclusively to describe women (Steinmetz 2015). The Women's Social and Political Union reclaimed the term and proudly used it as a descriptor for their organization. Women finally gained suffrage in 1918, over fifty years after the first women's suffrage societies were formed. While there is some debate about who contributed most to the success, historians agree that both constitutional and militant groups played a role in gaining the right to vote, as well as women's contributions during World War I (Nelson xvii).

The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the militant branch of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Great Britain from 1903-1917. From disrupting political meetings to committing arson, WSPU activists went to extremes to fight for their right to vote and their bodily freedom. The government jailed many women of the WSPU for their actions, and in response the WSPU began hunger strikes in July 1909. Rather than allow these women to

commit suicide through self-starvation, the government implemented a policy of force-feeding women engaging in hunger strikes. Symbolically, the hunger strikes can be understood as the one limited way women could exert control in their lives and reminded the public just how little control women had in other aspects of their lives at a time when nearly all major political and social institutions in England excluded them. The ultimate object of the hunger strike was to gain suffrage, but one can also infer that the WSPU activists used the hunger strikes to get out of prison early. The earlier they got out of prison, the earlier they could resume militant actions. The hunger strikes were an act of desperation, self-control, and resistance against a government that refused to recognize them as citizens. But even this type of self-assertion was seen as too much for the British government. The force-feedings allowed the government to enforce the women's entire prison sentence and exert their power over the suffragettes. Through force-feedings, the government stripped WSPU activists of power by preventing them from taking control of their bodies in this radical way.

The government take-over of the women's bodies can be seen as an example of how the government exerts bio-power. Bio-power is a concept developed by Michel Foucault that focuses on the "regulation of social life, social engineering, management or governmentality in which health, longevity, energy or vitality, stability and growth of social life is in focus" (Lilja 118). While they did not have the exact terminology of bio-power, the women being force-fed recognized the power the government was exerting over them after they attempted to take that power for themselves. Their personal narratives show how the suffragettes used the hunger strike as an argument against the government's control over female bodies and showcase the extremes the government will go to in order to maintain that form of control, rather than allow women control of their lives and bodies.

According to Michel Foucault, bio-power developed in contrast to sovereign power. For many years, the government – the sovereign – had the right to decide when someone lived or died through their power to execute their subjects. For Foucault, sovereign power is the right to “take life or let live,” and the sovereign embodies this power when he decides to kill a subject (*Society Must be Defended* 241). The sovereign was able to protect himself and maintain power through the threat of death, but during the eighteenth century this notion began to change. The threat of death was no longer a successful method to maintain control because “western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 142). Essentially, people began to realize that they could exert some control over when they would die, which took power away from the sovereign. The sovereign had to invent new ways to exert control over “living beings,” not just “legal subjects” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 142-3). Thus, bio-power describes the state’s capacity to “make live and let die” (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* 241). The sovereign, or government, is no longer concerned with taking life, but rather extending life through population management policies as well as various public health measures. The government will do everything in its power to keep its subjects alive, even if it is against the subject’s will. The government can now exert control by preventing death, which we see when the British government decided to force-feed women who were hunger striking.

### **Context for the Founding of the WSPU**

Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the founders of the WSPU, was born in Manchester, England, in 1858. As Emmeline describes, her parents were active in social movements of the time, including the emancipation of slaves in the United States (1). She describes the people of Manchester as liberal in their opinions (E. Pankhurst 3), which would have influenced her

opinions towards political and social issues. She explains that her move towards militant suffrage was a “sympathetic process,” and that she has “not personally suffered from the deprivations, the bitterness and sorrow which bring so many men and women to a realisation of social injustice” (E. Pankhurst 5). She attended her first suffrage meeting with her mother at the age of fourteen where she listened to speeches by Lydia Becker and Susan B. Anthony. She states that she “left the meeting a conscious and confirmed suffragist” (E. Pankhurst 9). Her family was comfortably middle class, and she attended a boarding school for girls in Paris for four years. When she returned from Paris, she began working for women’s suffrage, which is how she met her husband, Dr. Richard Pankhurst (E. Pankhurst 11). She raised her five children in a middle-class home and around her activist work. She states that her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, would beg to go to suffrage meetings when they were children and that they had faith that women would gain the right to vote. She recalls an instance where Christabel said to her, “How long you women have been trying for the vote. For my part, I mean to get it” (E. Pankhurst 36). This statement inspired Emmeline to bring together old and young suffragists to bring new possibilities to the movement and to finally win the right to vote.

The Pankhursts were a solidly middle-class family, but the majority of the members of the WSPU were working-class women. In the later years, upper-class women, like Lady Constance Lytton, joined the WSPU, but overall there were few upper-class women involved. Leadership of the WSPU remained confined to the Pankhursts or other middle-class women, apart from Annie Kenney – the only working-class woman to hold a leadership position in the WSPU. The fact that few upper-class and middle-class women were members of the WSPU might be related to the perception that suffragettes were unwomanly and that participating in radical acts of resistance was not compatible with their duties as wives and mothers. It is possible

that middle- and upper-class women avoided a radical group like the WSPU because of fears for their reputation. However, there are conflicting accounts about the role social class played in the WSPU. While the founding members were largely working class, Alison Lee states that the WSPU's relationship with working class women changed after the headquarters moved to London and the actions became more militant (Lee 23). Working-class women could not afford to go to prison and risk their livelihood, whereas middle- and upper-class women only had to risk losing friendships (Lee 24).

Social class is an issue not just in terms of the basic membership of the WSPU; it also later plays an important role with respect to how the suffragettes are treated in prison. Upper-class women, for instance, were not subjected to forced feedings when they were engaged in hunger strikes. Instead, they were released from prison on the basis that their health made them unfit for the procedure (Lee 26). Social class differences also played a role in how the government treated the suffragettes in public forums; these disparities are reproduced through the prison division system.

Through the Prison Act of 1898, the government divided all prisons into three different divisions: the first, second, and third division. These prison divisions seem to be connected to the social class of those imprisoned. Within these division, prisoners had different rights granted to them. In the first division, prisoners could wear their own clothes, bring outside food into the prison, access books and newspapers, receive visitors, write letters, and draw a salary. The first division included political prisoners and those who were charged with contempt of court or sedition. Prisoners in the second and third division did not have the privileges and were generally considered common criminals. They were kept in solitary confinement and had to work during their imprisonment. The distinction between the second and third division was made based on

the character of the prisoner. If the magistrate believed the person was of good character, the magistrate sentenced them to the second division. If not, the magistrate sentenced them to the third division (Lee 19n1). The first division, even though restricted to political prisoners, offered prisoners access to the comforts of the world outside of prison and set them apart from the other prisoners in a manner similar to social class. Magistrates could easily separate prisoners into the second or third division based on whether they were known. Those of higher social class could be sorted into the second division, while members of the working class (many of them sex-workers) would end up in the third division. The government also used the prison division system as a way to punish the women of the WSPU for their militant actions. In the early years of the movement, the government used prison sentence length and the classification as either second or third division as a way to deter the women from continuing their actions. As the WSPU's tactics escalated, so did the government's response.

### **The “Suffrage Army”**

Emmeline Pankhurst believed that the WSPU was a “suffrage army,” (59) and, with this, it is no surprise that the union turned to militant tactics. However, the early moments of militancy do not seem to actually be militant, at least by contemporary definitions of militancy – disrupting political meetings and questioning politicians had no threat of violence. Should we see these militant actions as truly militant, like the mainstream press believed, or should we recognize them as women who spoke out of turn and committed a social faux pas? Emmeline Pankhurst wrote,

The militancy of men, through all the centuries, has drenched the world with blood, and for these deeds of horror and destruction men have been rewarded with monuments, with great songs and epics. The militancy of women has harmed no human life save the lives

of those who fought the battle of righteousness. Time alone will reveal what reward will be allotted to the women. (i)

The founder of the WSPU classifies the union as militant, but should that term be used when compared to the militancy of men? As Emmeline states, the militancy of men has cost countless lives, which women's militancy has not. For the public to consider women militant, it seems that they just have to act in a way that isn't considered womanly for the time. Based on the quote from Emmeline, it seems that the term militancy must include violence, but this is not always true. According to the *OED*, one of the many definitions of militancy is "combative; aggressively persistent; strongly espousing a cause; entrenched, adamant" (3a). This definition fits the militancy during the early years of the WSPU when the women persistently questioned cabinet members and other members of Parliament. However, the term "militant" still evokes images of war and battle, imagery which the women of the WSPU use to describe their movement.

Through almost every account of the methods the WSPU used to petition the government, the women described their actions as a tactic or a weapon. The women of the WSPU were fighting a war against the government. The government was unwilling to recognize the women as full citizens, which left the women with little to no constitutional methods to gain suffrage. With no established path to victory, the women of the WSPU had to forge their own path to gain suffrage. Stepping outside of social norms led much of the public to see their actions as militant, and the women embraced implications of the term. As seen above, Emmeline Pankhurst believed that the WSPU was a "suffrage army," and this imagery was present in the suffrage fiction being written at the time. In her short story, "The Women at the Gate," Evelyn Sharp embraces the war imagery and portrays the government and suffragettes as opposing armies at war. She writes,

They wouldn't bring out six thousand police to arrest thirteen men, even if they all threw bombs... You've got to smash an idea as well as an army in every war, still more in every revolution, which is always fought exclusively round an idea. If thirteen women batter at the gates of the House of Commons, you don't smash the idea by arresting the thirteen women, which could be done in five minutes. So you bring out six thousand police to see if that will do it. That is what lies behind the mud and the slush—the idea you can't smash. (Sharp 297)

Sharp recognizes the gender differences between how the government and public react to women protesting for their rights versus when men protest for their rights. More than that, however, is how Sharp recognizes the power of the women's suffrage movement. The idea that the WSPU and other suffrage organizations present is stronger than the government's resistance to universal suffrage. Change is coming, and the government can't resist it no matter how many police officers they use or women they arrest. The interesting paradox within Sharp's story is that the government sends six thousand officers ostensibly to "smash an idea," but the fact of those six thousand officers also shows that the government is afraid of the idea in question. The extreme reactions to women's deputations and other suffrage activities show the government's deep-rooted fear of the women petitioning for their right to vote. The WSPU entered a never-ending cycle of action and retaliation with the government that would not have lasted fourteen years if not for this fear.

While the WSPU is most well-known for its militant actions, the organization did not begin with militant intents. Emmeline Pankhurst began the WSPU in 1903 after realizing that neither of the major political parties, Liberal and Conservative, were willing to address the question of women's suffrage. At the founding meeting, the women decided to remain

independent from all political parties rather than associate with one party like other women's suffrage organizations. The founding WSPU members also decided that the union would not associate itself with only one social class, and most of the women at the founding meeting were working-class women (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 7). In her memoir, *My Own Story*, Emmeline Pankhurst gives another account of the founding meeting. She makes no mention of the social class of the women present, like Sylvia does, but rather emphasizes that membership was limited to women who had to be free from party affiliation.

Emmeline Pankhurst explains that she banned the women of the WSPU from party affiliation because other suffragists were "party members first and suffragists second," and she believes that if all other suffrage societies had implemented her rules, women would have gained the right to vote many years earlier (E. Pankhurst 57). Emmeline's comparison of the WSPU to other suffrage societies is interesting because, in the early years of the union, the members made use of traditional and socially-accepted methods to try to gain support from members of Parliament. They functioned like all other suffrage societies of the time by lobbying to different members of Parliament and creating petitions to show that there was popular support for the idea of women's suffrage. Emmeline's account of the early days of the WSPU tries to immediately set the organization apart from other organizations whereas Sylvia's account recognizes the early similarities. These contrasting accounts are one of the earliest representations of how perspectives differed within the WSPU, and these differences are also found when the various suffragettes explain their motivations behind the hunger-strike. But how did the WSPU move from more traditional, constitutional methods to hunger strikes? Within two years of the founding, the women of the WSPU realized these traditional tactics were not gaining the results they wanted and something else needed to be done for women to gain the right to vote.

## **Move to Militancy**

In October 1905, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney attended a Liberal Party meeting at the Manchester Free Trade Hall and made the first move outside of socially-acceptable methods to petition for women's suffrage. During Sir Edward Grey's speech, Annie Kenney stood and asked Sir Grey about women's suffrage. Annie Kenney's question went unanswered, and she stood again and posed her question to Sir Grey, but this time men seated near her pushed her back into her seat to silence her question. Christabel Pankhurst then stood and posed the same question as Annie Kenney: "Will the Liberal Government give women the vote?" (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 26). This continued for multiple rounds until the meeting ended, and every time Annie and Christabel's question remained unanswered. Finally, Annie "stood up upon her chair and called out as loudly as she could, 'Will the Liberal Government give working women the vote?'" (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 28). Sylvia Pankhurst describes the scene that follows almost as if a mob attacked Annie and Christabel. The two women were roughly thrown out of the meeting, and were then arrested when they attempted to speak to the crowd that had gathered outside of the hall. For their crimes, a judge gave the women the choice to pay a fine or go to jail. Rather than pay a fine, Annie and Christabel spent three and seven days in prison, respectively (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 31). This is the first instance of members of the WSPU being arrested for their actions, and many people reference this as the first militant action of the WSPU. This raised the stakes for the women's suffrage campaign, and it seemed as if the government was going to take the women seriously. However, women were still met with strong opposition and force, and the government would not give a select group of women the right to vote until 1918. This tactic of interrupting town hall meetings and asking if the government would give votes for women became commonplace following the first instance. The

women who dared to pose this question were thrown out of the meetings and, in many cases, were arrested for their actions. This eventually evolved into the WSPU campaigning against the active government during elections as a way to fight against the government's treatment of women and lack of response to their questions. As time continued to pass with no progress on the issue of women's suffrage, the WSPU's tactics became more extreme in the eyes of society.

After continually being ignored and thrown out of meetings, the next step that the WSPU took in campaigning for women's right to vote was sending deputations of women to the House of Commons or the Prime Minister. One of the first deputations Sylvia Pankhurst describes in her history of the movement is the deputation to the Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, on March 9, 1906. This was a continuance of a deputation from a few days earlier when Sir Campbell-Bannerman's secretary took down their message to give to him. On March 9, the women assembled at 10 Downing Street were refused a meeting with the Prime Minister, or even his secretary. After being ignored for close to an hour, the doorman told the women that they must leave and were no longer allowed to stand outside the house. This deputation ended with three women arrested after one "seized the knocker and rapped sharply at the door" (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 63), another gained entrance to the house, and Annie Kenney tried to address the crowds. The women were not charged because the Prime Minister ordered the police to free the women and inform them that he would accept a deputation from the suffrage societies (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 64). With this, it seemed that Sir Campbell-Bannerman's government may be willing to work with the women towards the goal of votes for women. However, the deputation was still unable to get a pledge from the Prime Minister that he would support women's suffrage because "there were members of his Cabinet who were opposed," and he told the women assembled that they should be patient with regards to the matter (S. Pankhurst, *The*

*History 77*). The first women's suffrage societies were founded in 1867 (Nelson xxii), which means, by the time the Prime Minister preached patience, that women had been actively struggling for the right to vote for almost forty years. How much more patience did women need to show before the government would be willing to give them the right to vote?

Rather than practicing more patience, the women of the WSPU decided to pressure Cabinet ministers who most strongly opposed women's suffrage, specifically Mr. Herbert Henry Asquith. During one of the deputations to Mr. Asquith, the women were met by police, and when they did not immediately turn back, violence ensued. During the previous three years, the women of the WSPU had never engaged in violent protests and had done nothing more than refuse to back down when politicians would not answer their questions. For doing nothing more than attempting to meet with Mr. Asquith, "police fell upon them and began to strike and push them" (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 84). Theresa Billington was sentenced to two months in prison for her role in the deputation, but was later released when an anonymous person paid her £10 fine. Five other people were arrested that same day given varying prison sentences after refusing to pay their fines. As Sylvia remarks, "Of course this punishment was for daring to urge an unwelcome question upon Members of the Government, but as this was not a punishable act the charges of disorderly conduct outside in the road had been trumped up" (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 88). Through this point, the women of the WSPU had participated in actions that could be seen more as behaving badly rather than being truly violent or militant, yet the government response to these tactics continued to escalate. Interrupting a meeting resulted in a prison sentence no longer than a week, whereas attempting to meet with an unresponsive cabinet member resulted in a two-month prison sentence. As a result, suffragette tactics escalated due to the government refusing to consider the issue of women's suffrage.

In April 1908, Herbert Henry Asquith became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, which meant that the man most strongly opposed to women's suffrage was now the head of the government. He repeatedly ignored requests from the WSPU to receive a deputation, and on June 30, 1908, Mrs. Pankhurst led a deputation to the House of Commons to see Mr. Asquith in person. At some point during the commotion of the crowds of women at the House of Commons, Mary Leigh and Edith New made their way to 10 Downing Street and broke the lower windows of the building (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 253). This was the first instance of members of the WSPU throwing stones, and according to Emmeline Pankhurst, they acted without orders from the WSPU leadership (E. Pankhurst 118). Rather than disapproving of the actions, Emmeline "went at once to see them in their cells," and remarks that "the smashing of windows in a time-honoured method of showing displeasure in a political situation" (118-19). Furthering this point, Emmeline notes the difference in window-breaking when carried out by men rather than women: "when Englishmen do it, [it] is regarded as honest expression of political opinion ... when Englishwomen do it, [it] is treated as a crime" (119). The magistrate sentenced both women to two months in prison, either in the first or third division, depending on which account of the sentencing one reads. Sylvia states they were sentenced to two months in the third prison division (*The History* 255), while Emmeline states they were sentenced to two months in the first prison division (119).<sup>1</sup> If the women were truly placed in the third division, this is an instance of the government refusing to treat the women as political prisoners even though they were fighting for their rights as political subjects on England. The first hunger-

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<sup>1</sup> There is an inconsistency between the two accounts of the prison division placement. This could be due to the different publication years. Even if Mary Leigh and Edith New were placed in the first division, the majority of the women sent to prison were placed in the second and third division and refused status as political prisoners.

striker, Marion Wallace Dunlop, cites this as her reason for hunger-striking, as we will discuss below.

### **The Hunger Strike Begins**

Almost exactly one year after Mary Leigh and Edith New broke the windows of 10 Downing Street, Marion Wallace Dunlop visited the House of Commons and stamped a message onto a wall in the lobby. Her message said, “WOMEN’S DEPUTATION, JUNE 29th. BILL OF RIGHTS. It is the right of the Subject to petition the King and all commitments and Prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal” (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 381). This message explicitly states to the government that their actions towards the women of the WSPU have been illegal. The women who have been jailed have exercised their legal right to petition members of the King’s government. Marion Wallace Dunlop was not arrested when she was caught stamping this message. However, when she found out that her message made no impression on either the police or members of the government, she returned two days later to repeat her work as a “reminder to Parliament that the people’s liberties must not be violated” (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 382). This time, she was arrested for her actions and “tried for wilfully and maliciously damaging the stone-work of the House of Commons” (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 382). Rather than recognizing that women have the right to petition their government, the government willfully ignored the message Marion Wallace Dunlop was trying to send. On July 2, 1909, after refusing to pay the fine for her actions, the magistrate originally sentenced her to one month in the third division for what Marion Wallace Dunlop explained was purely a political action. The magistrate refused to give her status as a political prisoner, but did move her from the third division to the second division (“The Writing on the Wall”). On July 5, 1909, Marion Wallace Dunlop began the first hunger strike of the WSPU. When speaking of her actions in *Votes for*

*Women*, she stated her reasoning for beginning the hunger strike: “I did not eat breakfast on Monday, and I sent my application to Gladstone with a postscript to the effect that I demanded the right recognised by all civilised nations that a prisoner charged with a political offence should be given first division treatment” (“Miss Wallace Dunlop Released”). Marion Wallace Dunlop refused food for ninety-one hours before she was released from prison. The author of the *Votes for Women* article describes Wallace Dunlop’s release as the government recognizing that she was willing to die for her cause, and if that happened, all of England would react negatively towards the government. It is possible that hunger strikes would have never begun if the government were willing to treat the suffragettes as political prisoners. However, the women who undertook the hunger strike over the course of the movement all had different reasons for doing so, which makes the exact motives behind the initial hunger strikes hard to pinpoint.

In the article from *Votes for Women* about Marion Wallace Dunlop’s release from prison, the author recognizes the hunger strike as the weapon that it is: “she determined to carry into effect that *most terrible weapon* of political prisoners, the hunger strike. The terrible nature of this weapon will be understood when it is realized that its object can only be achieved when the Authorities realise that the prisoner is prepared to go through with her protest up to death itself...” (“Miss Wallace Dunlop Released,” emphasis added). This is one of the first instances of suffragettes referring to their actions as a weapon. The hunger strike is the “most terrible weapon” that the women can use against the government because it involves the threat of death. The hunger strike was a symbolic way to connect women together in the WSPU, but it also held real power over the government. While Wallace Dunlop’s early statements about the hunger strike suggest that she began the protest over prison treatments, this passage suggests that the ultimate object women are fighting for is suffrage. The hunger strike eventually evolved into a

staple of the WSPU, so it is entirely possible that the motives behind the strike evolved through the years it was used. At this time, Wallace Dunlop was able to successfully use the hunger strike as a weapon against the government because the government was unwilling to let the women die. Her jailers did everything in their power to try to coax her into eating, short of forcibly feeding her. They no longer presented her with prison food, but rather a higher quality of food not generally available to prisoners in the third division. The doctor visited her multiple times a day to check her pulse and would ask her what she was planning to eat for dinner. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, Wallace Dunlop's response was always, "my determination" (*The History* 392). Wallace Dunlop says that she told her jailers that the options were to place her in the first division, release her, or forcibly feed her.

By this time, 108 women had been arrested for their part in the deputation, so when Wallace Dunlop suggested that the doctor should force feed her, she also asked, "but suppose you get 108 women in here on Friday all requiring to be fed through the nostrils?" ("Miss Wallace Dunlop Released"). Wallace Dunlop recognized the power that the hunger strike gave her over the government, and she did not believe that the government would be willing to force feed the women in prison.

Fourteen women immediately followed Marion Wallace Dunlop in the hunger strike after being refused political prisoner status by the Governor of Holloway Jail and the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 392-93). One of those women, Florence Cooke, said she started the hunger strike because "all means of protest had been taken from me except one, and that was to do what Miss Wallace Dunlop had done, to refuse to take any food" (qtd. in S. Pankhurst, *The History* 394). Everything else these women tried to get the government to consider the question of suffrage had failed. Refusing to take food while in prison was the very

last method these women had at their disposal to make the government take them seriously. All fourteen women who began this hunger strike were released from prison after hunger striking for a range of five to six and a half days (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 396), which was before the sentences were set to end.

When speaking to the Matron of Walton Jail, who stated that the hunger strike was wrong, Lady Constance Lytton, in disguise as Jane Warton, responded by stating, “of course without an object it was very wrong, but the Government had been petitioned in every other way, we thought they would not like hunger-strikes for ever, that now there were still comparatively few, but later there would, if necessary, be many more” (Lytton 262). Her statements echo earlier statements made about the hunger strike – the hunger strike is a last resort for the WSPU because the government refuses to respond to every other method used. Lady Lytton, speaking as Jane Warton, believes that the hunger strike will force the government to grant women the vote because they cannot stay in the cycle of hunger striking and force feeding forever. In a speech after her experience as Jane Warton, Lady Lytton refers to the hunger-strike as the one weapon women have left at their disposal:

They [people against the hunger strike] will not realise that we are like an army, that we are deputed to fight for a cause, and for other people, and in any struggle or any fight, weapons must be used. The weapons for which we ask are simple, a fair hearing, but that is refused us in Parliament, refused us by the Government, refused us in the magistrates’ courts, refused us in the law courts. Then we must have other weapons. . . . These women have chosen the weapon of self-hurt to make their protest, and this hunger-strike brings great pressure upon the Government. (“A Speech by Lady Constance Lytton”).

Lady Lytton calls back to Emmeline Pankhurst's idea of the "suffrage army" and follows through with the military imagery. All methods the WSPU have been weapons in their fight for suffrage, and the hunger strike is also one of these weapons. The women of the WSPU seemed to have found an effective tactic to fight against the government and their prison sentences, but this control was short lived. These early releases due to health reasons continued until September 1909 when the government was no longer willing to let the women serve less than their full prison sentence.

### **Public Response to the Hunger Strikes**

While we know the government was concerned about the hunger strike and would soon change their policy, the mainstream media did not take the women hunger striking seriously. *The Times* barely reported on the incident and would tack a paragraph on to the end of an article relating to women's suffrage. In the July 9, 1909 edition, there was a brief mention of Wallace Dunlop:

Miss Marion Wallace Dunlop, of Montpelier-road, Ealing, who was charged at Bow-street Police Court on Friday last with wilfully and maliciously damaging the stonework of St. Stephen's Hall, Westminster, by placing thereon an inscription in ink, and who on refusing to pay the fine inflicted was sentenced to one month's imprisonment, has been discharged from Holloway Prison. It is understood that Miss Dunlop refused to take food.

("Woman Suffragists and The King")

This description of Wallace Dunlop and mention of her refusal to take food appeared at the end of an article describing the Women's Freedom League's attempt to send a deputation to the King. Wallace Dunlop's participation in the hunger strike is restricted to one short sentence at the end of a paragraph listing her residence and crimes. These short descriptions and brief

sentences about the hunger strike continued when the other fourteen women were released from prison. In the August 9, 1909, edition of *The Times*, the hunger strike is mentioned in one sentence that says “since their committal they refused to take food” (“News in Brief”). In a previous edition, the Home Secretary, Mr. Gladstone, is reported to have said that “the prisoners had obstinately refused to take food for several days,” and that he was required to release them on medical grounds (“House Of Commons” July 22, 1909). What is interesting about these three different accounts is the press’s refusal to call the hunger strike a hunger strike. *Votes for Women* describes the protest forthrightly as a hunger strike, but *The Times* always refers to the hunger strike as “a refusal to take food.” While that is technically a correct description of the women’s actions, it takes power away from their actions by refusing to recognize their protest in the tradition of other forms of agitation associated with men (i.e., labor strikes). This is the media’s conscious attempt to minimize the hunger strike and make it seem less important.

Even when the words “hunger strike” appear in *The Times*, they still function as a way to minimize the women’s actions. One editorial refers to the protest as a hunger strike, but it does so in a mocking tone: “These women have resorted to what they call a ‘hunger strike.’ Instead of submitting to the usual regulations affecting prisoners of their class, they have refused to take food. To a man who so refused, food would be compulsorily administered. The women have been let out” (“Women and the Suffrage”). This quote brings up one of the biggest tensions regarding the women’s suffrage movement: the belief that women are behaving in an “unwomanly” manner. The women in the movement feel that they received harsher punishments than men would for the same actions, but the author of this editorial feels that the government treated the women too leniently. The author also criticizes the women for not accepting the prison treatments they were subjected to, essentially stating that they should not expect to be

treated as political prisoners. In one sentence, the editorial both mocks the women for their protest and fails to understand the reason why the protest began. The author is tired of women not serving their entire prison sentence and would rather see the government forcibly feed the women to ensure their full sentence is served. They should not be treated like respectable women if they refuse to act like women – a sentiment echoed by the magistrates sentencing the women to prison. While sentencing the women for damaging windows, one magistrate said, “it was a lamentable thing to see a respectable woman charged with the same sort of offence which was daily charged against small hooligan boys in the street. There could be no justification for women parading through the streets armed with stones and breaking public windows” (“The Suffrage Disturbances”). The above two statements reflect public opinion about the women participating in the hunger strike and give insight as to why the government began forcibly feeding women undergoing the hunger strike.

While it is difficult to find public accounts about why the government changed its policy from early release to force feedings, there are accounts that hint towards a change in policy. In an account of the September 14, 1909, House of Commons meeting, Charles Masterman, a member of Parliament, stated that there were forty-one instances of early releases on medical grounds due to “self-starvation.” In addition, he stated, “the matter is an increasingly grave one, and the best means of dealing with it are now under serious consideration” (“House Of Commons” Sept. 15, 1909). Members of Parliament are still refusing to call the protest a hunger strike, but they know that it is a dangerous protest they must deal with. While the House of Commons does not specifically state what the “best means of dealing with it” are, one can infer that they mean forcible feedings. Within ten days of this House of Commons meeting, the government decided to begin forcibly feeding Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh. In a letter to the editor on September

28, 1909, Keir Hardie reports that Mr. Masterman confirmed that the suffragettes in Winston-green Prison were receiving “hospital treatments.” Mr. Masterman later went on to say that “hospital treatment” was a euphemism for forcible feedings (Hardie Sept. 28, 1909). Parliament members are still trying to minimize the fight for suffrage, as well as attempting to hide their actions from the general public. If they called these “hospital treatments” force feedings, the government would have to admit that the women were participating in hunger strikes to protest the government’s actions. The force feedings were a way for the government to respond to public backlash over women being released from prison early, and Keir Hardie describes the House of Commons’ reaction to the announcement: “I was horrified at the levity displayed by a large section of the members of the House when the question was being answered. Had I not heard it, I could not have believed that a body of gentlemen could have found reason for mirth and applause in a scene which I venture to say has no parallel in the recent history of our country” (Hardie Sept. 28, 1909). The reaction from politicians paired with public opinion of the hunger strikes shows that the government believed the women of the WSPU were a nuisance the government needed to deal with.

The women of the WSPU held different beliefs about why the government moved to a policy of force feeding. In a *Votes for Women* editorial, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, one of the publishers of the newspaper and a member of the WSPU, spoke about the symbolism of the hunger strike and the government’s response:

The “hunger strike” in prison is passive resistance. It is a symbolic act. It announces the fact that whatever may be done to the bodies of women they will never again consent with their spirit to be the slaves of the State. To break this spirit, to cow it into submission, to wring consent to the rule of brute force, is the avowed object of the system

of torture now inflicted by means of the nasal tube, the gag, and the stomach pump upon women in prison. (Lawrence Oct. 15, 1909)

For Pethick Lawrence, the hunger strike was not a way for the WSPU to subvert their prison sentences, but was a way for women to refuse consent to the government for treating them as second-class citizens. She believes that the force feedings are not a way for the government to ensure that women serve their full prison sentences, but rather to break the spirit of the women so they will once again be “slaves of the State.” However, this was unsuccessful as the WSPU continued to hunger strike until the government granted them the right to vote.

### **The First Forcible Feeding**

What Marion Wallace Dunlop provoked the government with soon became a reality in September 1909, and would be standard practice until 1913 when the government passed the Cat and Mouse Act. In response to the hunger-striking women, the government began to force feed the women in prison. On September 17, 1909, Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh stood upon the roof of a house near the hall where the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, was holding a meeting. From this roof, the two women tore up the slate tiles with axes and threw the tiles on the roof of the meeting and onto the street below. The women took care to injure no bystanders and announced every time they were preparing to throw the slate tiles (S. Pankhurst, *The History* 429). Many attempts were made by the police to get the women down from the roof until the police decided to turn fire hoses on the women, which put them at risk for sliding off the roof, which was thirty feet high. Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh continued to throw slate off the roof in spite of this, which caused the police to throw bricks and rocks at the women. However, the police began throwing these with the intent of hitting the women, and when they were removed from the roof, both were bleeding from wounds caused by the police (S. Pankhurst, *The History*

430). The court sentenced Charlotte Marsh to three months in prison and Mary Leigh to four months in prison, both with hard labor. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, the WSPU learned on September 24<sup>th</sup> that the government had decided to feed Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh by force rather than to release them after hunger striking (*The History* 431). It would take almost another month before the first account of force feeding was made public.

Mary Leigh's account of the first instance of force feeding appeared in *Votes for Women* through a statement made to her solicitor on October 15, 1909. The first few attempts of feeding Mary Leigh by force involved forcing her mouth open and feeding her with a spoon, which happened until the beginning of October. The doctors attempted to insert a nasal feeding tube on September 25<sup>th</sup>, but the doctors removed it when they realized it caused immense pain. On October 3, doctors followed through with feeding Mary Leigh by nasal tube:

Sunday noon, four wardresses and two doctors entered my cell and forcibly fed me by the tube through the nostrils with milk. Sunday evening, I was also fed through the nostril. ... The sensation is most painful – the drums of the ears seem to be bursting and there is a horrible pain in the throat and the breast. The tube is pushed down twenty inches. I have to lie on the bed, pinned down by wardresses, one doctors stands up on a chair, holding the funnel end at arm's length, so as to have the funnel end above the level, and then the other doctor, who is behind, forced the other end up the nostrils. ... Before and after use they test my heart and make a lot of examination. The after-effects are a feeling of faintness, a sense of great pain in the diaphragm or breast-bone, in the nose and the ears. ... I was very sick on the first occasion after the tube was withdrawn. I have also suffered from bad indigestion. I am fed in this way very irregularly. I have used no violence, though having provocation in being fed by force. I resist and am overcome by weight of

numbers. If the doctor does not think the fluid is going down sufficiently swiftly he pinches my nose with the tube in it and my throat, causing me increased pain. (Leigh Oct. 15, 1909)

The most striking thing about this account of force feeding is Mary Leigh's detachment in her retelling. Mary Leigh seems to recount the incident as if she were a bystander watching the forced feeding from afar. She has no role in the forced feedings, and the government has succeeded in detaching her consciousness from her body. The government bypasses her agency and control of her own body, and strips Mary Leigh of any personal autonomy gained through the hunger strike. She has to disown her body, in a sense, because she is no longer allowed to control her body, which one can see as a mark of her defeat and the government's success. Mary Leigh believes that the act of force feeding would give her a reason to react violently, yet she does not. She actively tried to resist the force feedings, but that is physically impossible when six people are attempting to force feed her. In this case, reacting violently would be a fruitless effort and would only serve to cause more suffering. Mary Leigh was released from prison on October 30, 1909, after serving just over one month of her four month sentence. If the government's reason for implementing force-feeding was to ensure the suffragettes would serve their full prison sentence, their solution failed. Mary Leigh served more jail time than she would have if she had not been force fed, but she still did not serve the entirety of her sentence.

In response to the force feeding, Mary Leigh took legal action against the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone. There are multiple accounts pointing towards the illegality of the force feeding, including one from a prison doctor. He is quoted as saying, "illegal or not, I'm going to use it," in reference to feeding by nasal tube ("The Birmingham Prisoners"). Even with the precedence of force-feeding being illegal, the court sided in favor of the Home Secretary and

Home Office in *Leigh v Gladstone*. The official ruling was that force-feeding was “curative and life-saving,” and force-feeding was only dangerous if the women “refused medical inspection or struggled” (Miller 2016). This comes into conflict with later accounts of force feeding where women, like Lady Constance Lytton, state the prison doctors never examined them to determine if they were physically able to undergo the procedure.

The focus on medical examination prior to force feeding is interesting due to the medical crudeness of the procedure. There is a high level of violence involved in forcing a nasal or oral tube into the prisoner’s esophagus and stomach, and the process requires at least seven people between the doctors and wardresses, as evidenced in all the accounts of forcible feedings. The doctors use either a steel or wooden gag in order to insert the oral tube, and many suffragettes wrote that they coughed up the oral tube multiple times during insertion. With this, there is a great risk of permanent damage or scarring to the esophagus and other internal organs. There were no advanced imaging techniques to guide the insertion of the feeding tube, so there is also a risk that the tube was not properly inserted into the esophagus. As we will see later with Lilian Lenton, this was the case, and doctors inserted the feeding tube into her trachea instead of her esophagus. As soon as forcible feedings began, medical professionals began speaking out against the procedure. In the same *Votes for Women* edition that included Mary Leigh’s statement about the forcible feeding, there were statements from physicians about the dangers of the procedure (“Further Medical Opinions”). The editors of *Votes for Women* included these physician warnings in almost every article detailing the forcible feeding procedure. Despite the medical community’s outcry and warnings against forcibly feeding a struggling patient, the government proceeded with a policy of forcible feeding.

### **Lady Constance Lytton as Jane Warton**

At the same time prison doctors were force feeding Mary Leigh, other members of the WSPU were engaged in a stone-throwing campaign in Newcastle. Among these women was Lady Constance Lytton, who, by her own words, was “as sure as death” that she would throw a stone (Lytton 204). She did, and as a result was sentenced to one month in the second prison division. While in jail, she participated in the hunger strike, just like the other women in prison with her. Almost immediately, there was a difference in how prison officials treated Lady Constance Lytton and the other women in prison. While the other women were being force-fed, the prison officials treated Lady Constance Lytton and Mrs. Brailsford with “nothing by kindness,” even though they were also hunger striking. On her second morning in prison, she believed the doctors were coming to force feed her, however, they just listened to her heart and felt her pulse. By the end of that same day, both she and Mrs. Brailsford were released from prison. Lady Constance Lytton was released due to a heart condition, while Mrs. Brailsford “had the noblest reputation for public service in Macedonia,” and her husband was “closely connected with Liberal journalism” (Lytton 231). The following day, two more women were released without being force-fed, and Lady Lytton stated, “the only reason that we could see was that our names were known, theirs were not!” (Lytton 232). Lady Constance Lytton was released from prison early and without being force fed, which was the government’s policy at the time, due to her title.

After Lady Lytton’s release from prison, she learned of the treatment other women received while in prison while she herself had not received the same treatment. As she writes in her memoir, “the altogether shameless way I had been preferred against the others at Newcastle, except Mrs. Brailsford who shared with me the special treatment, made me determine to try

whether they would recognise my need for exceptional favours without my name” (Lytton 235). To test this, Lady Lytton disguised herself as “Jane Warton,” an unknown, working-class woman. Lady Lytton remarked that she noticed that women “of unprepossessing appearance obtained least favour,” so she decided “to put ugliness to the test” (Lytton 239). She went to extraordinary measures to disguise herself as a working-class woman, including using the voice and mannerisms of working-class women at the time. In her memoir she wonders if she may have overdone the performance (Lytton 249). While disguised as Jane Warton in January 1910, Lady Lytton once again threw stones and the magistrate sentenced her to two weeks in the third division, with hard labor. Already, the lack of social standing resulted in different treatment.

This difference of treatment continued while “Jane Warton” was in prison. Lady Lytton immediately began the hunger strike, but unlike her previous experience in prison, she was force fed this time. As stated above, prison doctors gave Lady Lytton a medical examination prior to attempting to force feed her. In contrast, when she was in jail as Jane Warton no such medical exam happened (Lytton 268). If the ruling in Mary Leigh’s court case was that force feeding was only dangerous if women “refused medical examination,” what does it mean if the medical examination never occurred? In the time between Mary Leigh’s force feeding and Lady Lytton’s force feeding, the prison doctors lost their hesitance to force feed the women through the nasal or oral tube. Lady Lytton describes her the first instance she was force fed in her 1914 memoir, *Prisons and Prisoners*:

Two of the wardresses took hold of my arms, one held my head and one my feet. One wardress helped to pour the food. The doctor leant on my knees as he stooped over my chest to get at my mouth. I shut my mouth and clenched my teeth. ... The doctor offered me the choice of a wooden or steel gag; he explained elaborately, as he did on most

subsequent occasions, that the steel gag would hurt and the wooden one not, and he urged me not to force him to use the steel gag. But I did not speak nor open my mouth, so that after playing about for a moment or two with the wooden one he finally had recourse to the steel. He seemed annoyed at my resistance and he broke into a temper as he plied my teeth with the steel implement. . . .He said if I resisted so much with my teeth, he would have to feed me through the nose. The pain of it was intense and at last I must have given way for he got the gag between my teeth, when he proceeded to turn it much more than necessary until my jaws were fastened wide apart, far more than they could go naturally. Then he put down my throat a tube which seemed to me much too wide and was something like four feet in length. The irritation of the tube was excessive. I choked the moment it touched my throat until it had got down. Then the food was poured in quickly; it made me sick a few seconds after it was down and the action of the sickness made my body and legs double up, but the wardresses instantly pressed back my head and the doctor leant on my knees. *The horror of it was more than I can describe.* I was sick over the doctor and wardresses, and it seemed a long time before they took the tube out. As the doctor left he gave me a slap on the cheek, not violently, but, as it were, to express his contemptuous disapproval, and he seemed to take for granted that my distress was assumed. (Lytton 269-70, emphasis added)

Unlike Mary Leigh's account of her forced feeding, Lady Constance Lytton is not detached from her retelling. She takes away the government's victory over the WSPU by refusing to disown and detach from her body during the experience. It could also be due to the fact that the women embarking on the hunger strike were fully aware that they would be forcibly fed during their time in prison. They most likely would have read the other women's accounts of the force

feeding and knew what would happen to them. However, even with the foreknowledge of what would happen, Lady Lytton does not have the words to describe “the horror” of the procedure. In her account, the prison doctors are no longer hesitant to use force and cause pain. When Lady Lytton vomits after the feeding, the doctor and wardresses forcibly kept her lying on her back. On top of the horror of the forced feeding, the doctor slapped Lady Lytton after the procedure was over. Even though she states that she was not slapped “violently,” it was still another violation of her rights and showed the doctor’s lack of respect for her.

She was forcibly fed multiple times during her time in prison and was sick after every feeding. After the second time she was forcibly fed and sick, the doctor stated that he would feed her twice if she was sick again the next time (Lytton 273). After the third feeding, she looked ill enough for the doctor to check her heart. From previous medical examinations, Lady Lytton knew she had a heart condition. However, during “the space of a second” that the medical officer examined her heart, he determined her heart was perfectly healthy and told the doctor to carry on with the feedings (Lytton 275). On Sunday, January 23, 1910, Lady Constance Lytton was released from Walton jail on medical grounds after being forcibly fed for five days (Lytton 293). She served eight days of her fourteen day sentence. In the immediate aftermath of the force feeding, she described the process as “a living nightmare of pain, horror, and revolting degradation. ... There is also a feeling of complete helplessness, as of an animal in a trap, when the operators come into one’s cell and set to work” (Lytton Jan. 28, 1910). The women being force fed experience a feeling of losing all control over their bodies, which has psychological impacts beyond the immediate event. Their experiences in prison dehumanize them, and the government uses it as an attempt to break their spirit of resistance. It seems that the government began the force feeding to ensure that the women would serve the entirety of their prison

sentence. However, once again, the government failed to meet this goal, and this time they force fed a woman with high social standing who they previously refused to.

After her release from prison, Lady Constance Lytton spoke out about her treatment in prison while disguised as Jane Warton and how it differed from her treatment as Lady Lytton. While she was released prior to being force fed in October 1909 due to her heart condition, she was subjected to force feeding while in prison as Jane Warton. On top of this difference, she received no medical examination prior to being force fed as Jane Warton. In her writings after her release, she exposed the government's prejudice towards working class women in the WSPU. In an editorial in *Votes for Women*, she writes that the Home Secretary vehemently denied that she received preferential treatment based on her social class, and she was released because the "serious heart disease" she had (Lytton Jan. 28, 1910). In light of her treatment as Jane Warton, this statement is obviously false. If her original release was not due to her social standing, then she should have been released as Jane Warton because she still suffered from the same heart condition. Lady Lytton even recognizes this: "In Newcastle a specialist had been called in and my heart tested with elaborate paraphernalia for ten to fifteen minutes; but now that same heart belonged only to Jane Warton" (Lytton Jan. 28, 1910). However, when the prison officials began to suspect that she was someone more than Jane Warton, she began to receive preferential treatment, unlike the other women imprisoned with her (Lytton Jan 28. 1910). From this, there should be no doubt that the government preferentially treated women of high social standing.

The government attempted to deny that Lady Lytton received preferential treatment by stating that she refused medical examination during her time in Walton jail as Jane Warton (Lytton 303). In response to the public outcry over the treatment of Lady Constance Lytton, the

new Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, introduced rule 243a, which granted first division privileges to second- and third-division prisoners (Haslam 22). The stipulation with rule 243a was that the prisoner must have good character and not be convicted of a crime “involving dishonesty, cruelty, indecency, or serious violence” (qtd. in Haslam 22). Based on Marion Wallace-Dunlop’s reasoning for engaging in the hunger strike, rule 243a should have stopped the hunger strikes, and thus the forced feedings. However, by this point, the hunger strike had grown to a protest against the government’s refusal to grant women’s suffrage, and the government did not always enact rule 243a for suffragette prisoners.

### **Sylvia Pankhurst’s Account**

While not as heavily publicized, the hunger strike and forced feedings continued after the enactment of rule 243a. The next account of forcible feeding comes from Sylvia Pankhurst in 1913. Just like the escalation of force between Mary Leigh and Lady Constance Lytton, Sylvia Pankhurst’s account is more graphic than Lady Lytton’s, with Maud Ellmann describing it as a scene of “oral-rape,” though Pankhurst herself never uses the word rape (33). Pankhurst recounts her experience in 1931:

There were six of them, all much bigger and stronger than I. They flung me on my back on the bed, and held me down firmly by shoulders and wrists, hips, knees and ankles. Then the doctors came stealing in. Someone seized me by the head and thrust a sheet under my chin. My eyes were shut. I set my teeth and tightened my lips over them with all my strength. A man’s hands were trying to force open my mouth; my breath was coming so fast that I felt as though I should suffocate. His fingers were striving to pull my lips apart—getting inside. I felt them and a steel instrument pressing round my gums, feeling for gaps in my teeth. I was trying to jerk my head away, trying to wrench it free.

Two of them were holding it, two of them dragging at my mouth. I was panting and heaving, my breath quicker and quicker, coming now with a low scream which was growing louder. "Here is a gap," one of them said. "No, here is a better one. This long gap here!" A steel instrument pressed my gums, cutting into the flesh. I braced myself to resist that terrible pain. "No, that won't do"—that voice again. "Give me the pointed one!" A stab of sharp, intolerable agony. I wrenched my head free. Again they grasped me. Again the struggle. Again the steel cutting its way in, though I strained my force against it. Then something gradually forced my jaws apart as a screw was turned; the pain was like having the teeth drawn. They were trying to get the tube down my throat, I was struggling madly to stiffen my muscles and close my throat. They got it down, I suppose, though I was unconscious of anything then save a mad revolt of struggling, for they said at last: "That's all!" and I vomited as the tube came up. They left me on the bed exhausted, gasping for breath and sobbing convulsively. (*An Intimate Account* 443-44)

From this account of being force fed, it seems as if the doctors became more brutal and aggressive since Lady Lytton's force feeding three years earlier. One can quickly tell that Sylvia Pankhurst is being violated in an incredibly personal way. She does everything possible to resist this violation, but, much like Mary Leigh, she is overcome by the sheer strength of numbers. She has no control over the immense pain she is forced to undergo. Even with the pain she experienced, she believed the worst part of the experience was the sense of degradation she felt (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 444). The government, through the work of the prison officials, strips Sylvia Pankhurst of all her rights and bodily autonomy. She recognized that the doctors and wardresses were following orders from the government, and she believed they would not force this "treatment" upon her if they had a choice (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 444).

She was treated as less than human by other human beings, but she did not blame them for their actions. However, it is important to note Sylvia Pankhurst's doctors' lack of empathy in comparison to Mary Leigh's doctors.

When Mary Leigh was in pain, the prison doctors reverted to feeding her with a spoon. They did eventually feed her with a nasal tube, but her doctors did not reach the same level as Sylvia Pankhurst's doctors, or even Lady Constance Lytton's doctors. Even if they didn't enjoy causing pain, they were still willing to cause it. Arguably, this is because the government ordered the doctors and other officials to perform the forced feedings. But this begs the question, where does the government draw the line with forced feedings? Multiple women had come forward with horrifying accounts of their treatment in prison and during the forced feedings, but the government turned a blind eye and allowed the procedure to continue. This finally changed when another suffragette, Lilian Lenton, nearly died due to the forcible feeding in 1913.

### **Lillian Lenton's Near-Death**

In 1912, the WSPU moved past simple window breaking and stone throwing. In July 1912, Christabel Pankhurst began a secret arson campaign (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 401). While participating in this arson campaign, Lilian Lenton was arrested in the early morning hours of February 20, 1913 under suspicion of burning a tea pavilion at Kew Gardens ("Arson by Suffragists"). She was held without bail, and began the hunger strike because of this ("Arson by Suffragists"). Her hunger strike lasted two days before she was forcibly fed on a singular occasion ("Forcible Feeding Scandal"). During that attempt, the feeding tube was passed into her trachea instead of her esophagus, and food was poured directly into her lungs (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 452). Due to food entering her lungs, she contracted pneumonia and pleurisy

and was immediately released from prison (Forcible Feeding Scandal”). Afterwards, the government attempted to cover-up that their actions nearly killed a suffragette.

There was public outcry following Lilian Lenton’s release, but not for the expected reasons. The general public did not know about her condition, and assumed that the government was being lenient on a woman who burned down a tea pavilion (“Forcible Feeding Scandal”). The government’s response did nothing to remedy this false belief. While the Home Office did report that she was on the brink of death, they let the public believe it was due to her hunger strike, not a failed forced feeding:

I am desired by the Home Secretary to say that Lilian Lenton was reported by the medical officer at Holloway Prison last Sunday to be in a state of collapse, and in imminent danger of death consequent upon her refusal to take food. Three courses were open: (1) To leave her to die; (2) to attempt to feed her forcibly, which the medical officer advised would probably entail death in her existing condition; (3) to release her on her undertaking that she would surrender herself for the further hearing of her case. The Home Secretary adopted the last course. (“Forcible Feeding Scandal”)

With this, the Home Office not only states that she was in danger because “her refusal to take food,” but they also say one of their options would have been to forcibly feed her, which further gives the perception that she was never forcibly fed. She later issued a statement that brought to light her forcible feeding, and it finally became clear that forced feedings were not the appropriate way to deal with hunger strikes. The Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, stated that he “was not prepared to let women die for window-breaking and obstinacy” (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 452). The government needed to come up with a new solution for the hunger strike, and, partially due to Lilian Lenton’s case, the government passed The Prisoners’

Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Bill, more commonly known as the “Cat and Mouse Act” (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 453). With this bill, prisoners would be released once their hunger strike began to negatively affect their health, and then re-arrested once their health recovered. Long-term effectiveness of this bill is unknown since it was not in place long before World War I began. When the war began, the WSPU ceased militant activities and supported the war effort. When the war ended in 1918, the first group of women gained suffrage and WSPU activities did not need to resume.

## **Conclusion**

The forcible feeding of suffragette prisoners is how the government exerted bio-power over the suffragettes. Force feeding was the state-sponsored tool of dominance over the members of the WSPU, and was an attempt to get the women to cease their militant actions. Like Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence stated, forcible feeding was a “system of torture,” design to bring women back into an obedient, slave-like state. As the *Votes for Women* article discussing Mary Leigh’s experiences stated, the women undergoing the hunger strike were willing to take their protest the whole way to death. The government was aware of this and needed a way to take control back from the women. The government was unwilling to let women die for their cause, and Reginald McKenna stated that if they let one woman die, there would be fifty women willing to die (S. Pankhurst, *An Intimate Account* 452). In enacting a policy of forcible feeding, the government forced the women of the WSPU to live, even though their intent was death. The women had no control, even when it came to dying on their own terms. Prison doctors even told Constance Lytton, “We are doing our duty in saving your life” (Lytton Jan. 28, 1910). They do not care whether the women wanted their lives saved, they must do so to obey orders from the government.

Prison hunger strikes still occur today, like the one currently happening in Palestine, but forced feedings are not considered as controversial as they were in the early 1900s. The forced feeding procedure is typically safer now than it was in the early 1900s due to improved medical technologies and better equipment. However, even with these seemingly safer techniques and equipment, we must stop and think about the impacts of forcible feedings. Not only is there still a risk of death if the procedure is done incorrectly, but those making the decision to force feed a prisoner are assuming control over the prisoner's body in a very specific way. From the suffragette accounts of force feedings, we know the process is incredibly painful and degrading, even when the doctors try to cause as little pain as possible. Those women lost all sense of control over their bodies, and their bodies essentially became objects of the state. Like stated, procedures for forcible feedings, or any type of tube feeding, are much safer, more humane, and can be done with more respect than was shown with the suffragettes. However, government and prison officials make a fundamental judgement about the status of prisoners and how their bodies can be treated. They place prisoners in a lower position and with that can exert control over those prisoners. Rather than resorting to forcible feedings, governments need to understand the reasons why a prison hunger strike began in the first place. If it was because of prison conditions, then the government needs to be willing to improve prison conditions. If it was because a group of people lacks the right to vote, like with the suffragettes, the government needs to seriously consider granting that group the right to vote. Suffragettes continued their hunger strikes because the British Government refused to consider female suffrage in a serious manner. Instead of turning to tools of state-sponsored dominance, governments need to be willing to compromise with their citizens. To see the way forward, governments must look back upon history and learn from the mistakes that were made, like with the forced feeding of British suffragettes.

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