

Songs of the Suffragists
Lyrics of American Feminism from 1850 to 2020

Conversation Starters and Moderator Discussion Guide

In honor of the 19th Amendment Centennial, the [League of Women Voters Berkeley Heights, New Providence & Summit](#) published a short book and film to provide historical societies, LWV chapters, high schools, libraries and book groups with a “ready-made” program around the Women’s Suffrage movement.

The [book](#) and [film](#) are designed to spark conversation, and were developed for a wide range of audiences: from groups with limited prior knowledge about American Feminism to those with a deep familiarity. Some groups may want to focus on the historical aspects, while others will want to concentrate on musical history or modern-day sociology. As a discussion group leader, you have a wide variety of topics you can choose to highlight in your program.

This [Guide](#) provides a selection of questions for you to explore with your group. Some are controversial, some introspective, but all are intended to spark interesting conversations.

TIPS for a successful online program:

- Consider the technical skills of your audience—
 - If your group is less familiar with online conferencing technology, consider providing a link in your program invitation to an online tutorial for the web-conferencing program you intend to use.
 - Encourage members to read the book in advance! Include links to the book in your program invitation. But do not be surprised if some attendees do not read it before the event. Our film runtime is less than 30 minutes, and starting with a “viewing party” can provide all participants with common information.
- Determine the expected size of your audience in advance —
 - It is difficult to have a lively online discussion with groups larger than 10-12 people. If you have a large crowd, consider using break-out groups for your post-film discussion.
- Provide the questions you intend to pose at the event to one or two participants in advance, and ask them to be prepared to respond.
 - People are often shy during the first ½ hour of a program, but usually warm to the topic after they hear others engage!

The following numbered topics are each designed to spark five to fifteen minutes of conversation. It would be a rare group indeed that discusses ALL of these questions in a single program!

1. Can art really persuade people to change their opinions?

- a. Have you ever been persuaded to a cause by a song, movie or TV show?
- b. Think about the last time you've changed your opinion on a social or political cause. What influenced your decision?
- c. What role do you think pop culture plays in persuading people to a point of view?

2. As described in the book and film, songs were used both to inspire and unify supporters, mock the opposition, and persuade people to their side.

- a. "March of the Women" (pp.18-19) was typically shouted by the suffragists, not sung. Listen to a sung performance [here](#).
 - i. Discuss the musical treatment of this song. Do you believe it would be more effective if sung or shouted?
 - ii. The song was written in 1910 and references "comrades." Read "[The Socialist and the Suffragist](#)" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman aloud, and discuss the overlap between socialism and feminism in the early 1900s.
- b. "The Anti-Suffrage Rose" (pp.22-23) does not present many arguments in favor of denying women the vote. Does the [music](#) provide a persuasive element?
- c. Compare [Aretha Franklin's](#) version of "Respect" with [Otis Redding's](#). Which do you think is more compelling? Why?

3. In the 2007 movie, [Music and Lyrics](#), the budding lyricist, Sophie Fisher, says:

A melody is like seeing someone for the first time. The physical attraction. ... But then, as you get to know the person, that's the lyrics. Their story. Who they are underneath. It's the combination of the two that makes it magical.

- a. What combination of music and lyrics found in one of the *Songs of the Suffragists* or other feminist songs do you find "magical"?
- b. In what way are songs a more powerful medium for social activism than TV/Film?
- c. There are several comedic songs discussed in the book. Do you think humor is more or less important now as a method of persuasion?

- 4. *Songs of the Suffragists* states that society has made progress on women's rights over the past century.**
- What changes have you seen in your lifetime?
 - What changes would you like to see in your lifetime?
- 5. Women's attire is a repetitive theme in the lyrics of American feminism, specifically discussed in: "The Bloomers Complaint" (pp. 4-5), "Eliza Jane" (pp.14-15), "The Pill" (pp.38-39), and "Hijabi" (pp.42-43).**
- What is the role of fashion in the women's movement?
 - How is a woman's outward appearance judged?
 - How is the freedom of movement (e.g. riding a bike or driving a car) entwined with the freedom of dress (e.g. wearing hot pants, a corset, bloomers, or a hijab)?
 - What similarities and differences do you see between the feminist movement for freedom of dress and movement in 21st Century Saudi Arabia and in 19th-20th Century U.S.?
- 6. The film discusses how NJ women lost the right to vote in 1807.**
- In your lifetime, have you seen people lose rights they have gained? What about economic benefits?
 - Are you worried about losing any rights that you have now? Are there any rights that you have that you believe are at risk of being lost?
 - In your experience, has the elimination of rights/benefits sparked a response? Politicians often worry that taking rights away from people will provoke a backlash. When has that happened/not happened?
- 7. *Songs of the Suffragists* argues that social change will not happen without changes in both law and culture.**
- Do you agree with this premise?
 - What is more powerful: law or culture?
 - Can you think of a time when cultural change has happened, but laws have not reflected that change?

8. Motherhood was a theme that persuaded many to the suffragist side (see “She’s Good Enough to Be Your Baby’s Mother” (pp.24-25). The film and book discuss how the mythology around motherhood was used by both pro- and anti-suffragists.

- a. What have been some of the arguments centered on motherhood used by feminists and their opponents in the past as well as today?
- b. Do you believe pro-feminist arguments based on women’s roles as mothers are more or less effective than other kinds of appeals?

9. To what extent does leveraging culturally-accepted roles hurt or help the feminist cause?

- a. Can women who follow “traditional” paths exploit cultural expectations and privilege to made advances for all women? Will those advances last?
- b. If the women’s movement grows too “radical,” will it spark a backlash?

10.The film suggests that ERA-proponents were defeated because they did not include enough “traditional” women in their movement.

- a. Do you agree with this premise?
- b. What is the role of radicals vs. “quiet supporters” in a movement?

11.Women have been fighting for freedom from violence since the early days of the American feminist movement in the 19th Century.

- a. What progress has been made?
- b. What do you think needs to happen for the problem of violence against women to be a non-issue 100 years from today?

12. The film cites TLC's song "[His Story](#)," the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings, and the movement to Believe Women, whose allegations of assault have historically been dismissed by law enforcement.

The TLC [song](#) actually highlights the difficulties in sexual assault allegations tried under the spotlight of public opinion by giving a shout out to [Tawana Brawley](#). This 1987 case raises questions regarding the presumption of innocence, chronic disbelief of women (especially women of color), false allegations, and the concept of "truthiness," before that word was even coined.

In what way has our justice system failed both victims of sexual assault as well as the accused?

- a. Men are now scared that their reputations will be destroyed by an allegation of sexual assault, and [fear false allegations](#) of abuse against women more than they fear false allegations of other criminal activity. Yet men are [more likely](#) to BE raped than be falsely accused of rape. Why are men so scared? In what way are their fears justified/unjustified?
- b. False allegations of shoplifting [abound](#), but are not publicized in the same way that false rape allegations are. To what extent does the class/status of the alleged perpetrator come into play?
- c. In what way has media attention to allegations of sexual assault by powerful men helped or hurt the movement to eradicate sexual violence?

13. Early suffragists drew comparisons between slavery and the legal treatment of women in the pre-19th Amendment United States. (See pp. 6-11)

- a. Do you find this comparison offensive, hyperbolic, apt?
- b. Tennessee representative Harry Burn explained his pivotal vote in favor of suffrage in part as an act to "free" women from "political slavery." What do you think of this sentiment?

14. The film claims that the author of “Eliza Jane” (pp. 14-15) used racism to support his arguments against modern women.

- a. While there are many examples of suffragists supporting racial equality, there are also many examples of suffragists ignoring racial inequities and even perpetuating them. To what extent is it possible to delink one movement for equality from another?
- b. In discussing the disenfranchisement of NJ women in 1807, the authors of the “Petticoat Electors” (citation on pp.56) argue:

it might not have escaped the politically sophisticated Federalist widows of New Jersey that their voting rights were firmly tied to those of blacks and aliens. Consequently, they might have preferred to lose their right of suffrage rather than re-enfranchise those they considered inferior to themselves.

Do you believe that people would prefer to have high status more than they want power?

15. The lyrics of “Woman” (pp.44-45) as well those in many rap songs, including “The Story of O.J.” (pp.34), discuss economic power in the context of gender and racial equality. Consider the lyrics from “Woman” on pp. 45 as well as the [lyrics](#) from “The Story of O.J.”

- a. Can a member of a marginalized group “buy” power and status with economic power?
- b. If the goal is social advancement, is it better for one individual to attempt to break into the “1%” than to protest for changes in culture/laws to promote equality for their marginalized group across the economic spectrum?

THANK YOU for using this program guide to help celebrate the Women’s Suffrage Centennial. Please [email](mailto:lwvbhnp@yahoo.com) us (lwvbhnp@yahoo.com) and let us know how your event goes!

*The League of Women Voters
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