

1893–1915

THE TRAILBLAZERS

Women around the world had been fighting for a voice and a vote for many years. But it was the expectation-defying frontier women who worked the wild, rugged land as hard as men, or fought alongside them to free their country from foreign rule, who kick-started everything.

New Zealand

1893

Heads turned as Kate Sheppard sped through the streets of Christchurch, New Zealand on a bike in 1892. People thought that exercise like this could damage fragile women, so they discouraged the unladylike behaviour. But cycling gave Kate and her friends independence when most women weren't allowed to own property, or have an education or a career.

Kate's family had travelled to New Zealand from Britain, along with thousands of other settlers, during the 1850s. Life was hard in this tough, new land, and women worked alongside men building homes and tending farms. Because they were working as equals, women wanted to be treated as equals, and this included being allowed to vote.

To raise support for their cause, women published pamphlets, collected petitions and lobbied politicians. Kate travelled the country giving empowering speeches that drowned out any opposition. In 1893, history was made when both indigenous Maori women and female European settlers became the first women in the world to win the right to vote in a national election. Their success started a ripple that turned into a wave that began to spread around the world.



South Africa



1930

In Ecuador it was hard enough for women to win equality. But in South Africa's two-tiered society, where white European settlers ruled a black majority, the struggle to secure the vote for all was even more difficult.

When white South African women were granted the vote by an all-white, all-male government in 1930, many of them celebrated this long-awaited victory. Certain of their superiority, they even supported fresh laws to suppress the black men and women who worked in their homes and fields. But other white women were ashamed of the result, and marched and demonstrated in support of their black sisters and brothers. One group of white rebel women known as the Black Sash stood in powerful, silent protests in prominent places. They wore wide black sashes mourning the death of equal rights.



1994

On 9 August 1956, members of the Black Sash joined an historic march against the unfair laws that divided South African society. 20,000 angry women came from far and wide to raise their arms and voices in protest against the political chains that bound them. After handing the government hefty petitions containing 100,000 signatures, this vast community of women stood in compelling, absolute silence for half an hour, before breaking into a thundering song of defiance: 'Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock. You have dislodged a boulder. You will be crushed!'

The Women's March was a spectacular success, but protesters needed the strength of a rock or boulder to endure the tough years of riots, violence, arrests and beatings that lay ahead of them. At last, in 1994, black men and women were granted the right to vote. Today, 9 August is a national holiday in South Africa to remember and honour women's valiant efforts to create a fairer society.