

Helen Pankhurst

Granddaughter of Sylvia Pankhurst, and great granddaughter of Emmeline, Helen is a senior advisor to development organisation Care International

INTERVIEW **NICOLA GILL** PHOTOGRAPH **PÅL HANSEN**

I’m steeped in activism – it’s imprinted in my DNA.

Growing up with such pioneering female relatives was a privilege. I felt honoured and proud to be related to them, particularly as what they fought for is still so pertinent.

The negative side of my famous ancestors was a degree of embarrassment.

My daughter’s classmates always turned their heads to look at her whenever feminism was discussed. On first hearing the connection, some people become really enthusiastic with me – or scathing – and want a detailed discussion about it there and then, when actually I might be thinking about what train to catch.

There was a huge schism between Emmeline, who focused solely on getting the vote, and Sylvia, who had much broader views on improving women’s lives everywhere. But I feel they were both right and that women everywhere are interconnected.

Sylvia died before I was born, but her influence on my life is very significant, not just because of her feminist activism, but her interest in wider social change. Also, as she moved to Ethiopia and raised her family there, I was born there. Sylvia is one of my middle names, and when I live in Ethiopia, for around half the year, I stay in her room.

I wasn’t raised to be political; my parents never pushed a particular agenda. But I was encouraged to read a lot and to be interested in the wider world. I think they hoped I would become an academic though, rather than a development worker and activist.

I’m really, really close to my children [Laura, 20, and Alex, 18] and I’m sure it’s because I’ve always kept the lines of communication open. My view is ‘communicate, don’t judge’. I’ve always let them know they can talk to me about anything, that I won’t get angry, and that we can work through anything together by talking.

I surround myself with people who are positive and see the funny side. Being cynical about things like politics, and abdicating responsibility, seems such a waste. I try to work with others to create a ‘can do’ type of energy.

I wish people were more honest. With me, you get what you see. Life’s so much more complicated if you don’t know what people are really thinking.

I’m heartened by the new wave of feminism. Five years ago, I used to be met with silence when I gave talks in schools. Now, more and more of the young girls I meet are on board. Campaigns and platforms like Everyday Sexism and No More Page 3 have all helped them engage.

I’m not a spiritual or religious person; I’m too much of a pragmatist. I’m a doer, a ‘roll my sleeves up and get the dishes done’ kind of person.

The value of perseverance is getting lost. The Suffragettes started campaigning in 1903, but women only got the vote on the same terms as men in 1928. That’s years of campaigning on one critical issue. Sometimes I feel that with the easy life we have in the West now, children play computer games and are forgetting how to keep going with tasks that are slow and tough, whatever they may be.

I believe that small, simple changes can make a huge difference. We can all challenge inequalities every day. How you treat a stranger in the street matters as much as bigger gestures. I work with Care International, helping provide clean water in developing countries, because a large part of girls’ and young women’s day-to-day lives in poor countries is taken up with the burden of fetching and carrying water. Free them up from that endless, time-consuming task, and they can learn and achieve.

careinternational.org.uk; the film ‘Suffragette’, which tells the story of Emmeline Pankhurst’s struggle for women to have the vote, is out now

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