

Young women: They're angry and unafraid ^[1]

When young women feel they are no longer held back by their gender, one outcome is an increase in political confidence

Author: Power, Nina

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EXCERPTS.

Britain may still have appalling representation of women in parliament (as of the general election there were 144 female MPs to more than 500 male MPs), but the streets tell a different story. In the four major education protests before Christmas, women were frequently at the forefront: organising, talking to the media, standing up against increasingly aggressive police tactics, and articulating how and why the cuts would affect students.

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In the buildup to what looks likely to be the biggest trade union demonstration in recent history, on 26 March, the role of women in organising and participating in protest will continue to be central. Nevertheless, for the usual suspects the participation of so many young women - in the education protests in particular - has given rise to a certain moral panic. See, for example, the hilarious Daily Mail cover: "Rage of the Girl Rioters".

The attempted pillorying of these young women - accused of "lacking respect" - by the Mail is the latest in a long line of attacks on women who campaign directly against the state: the suffragettes; women involved in the 1926 general strike; the miners' protests in the mid-80s; those who fought for reproductive rights and against domestic violence. Just as with the attack on "ladettes" in the 1990s, what looks to be a moral criticism frequently masks a deeper political and economic fear - what shall we do when young women are academically successful, economically independent, socially confident and not afraid to enjoy themselves? Could there be anything more terrifying?

It would be a mistake to imagine that the strong participation of women in recent political protests is something new; nevertheless, the flip side of this female visibility is the way in which women, particularly working-class women, are already far more likely to be negatively affected by the cuts. Combined with the disparity in pay between men and women, and the fact that it is women who still do most domestic work and childcare - even if they are doing two or three other jobs outside the home - it seems obvious why more women would be taking to the streets.

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While there were many women tirelessly campaigning throughout the 1990s and 2000s on a variety of issues - both those that directly concerned women and as part of broader political campaigns - it was with the anti-war marches from 2003 onwards that the kind of street politics we see today came back on the agenda in a more visible way. Many of the schoolkids who played truant to attend anti-war protests have grown into articulate and politically passionate adults, rightly incensed that education is being transformed into something insanely expensive, increasingly exclusive and socially divisive.

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When young women feel they are no longer held back by their gender, that they can take on any job, that they are more likely to do well in education than their male peers, that they don't have to think of themselves as wives and mothers first, one outcome is an increase in political confidence. If you tell women they can be and can do anything they want, and then let them down - by taking away their education maintenance allowance, by making university prohibitively expensive, by forcing them to stay in poverty - they, along with their male peers, will make you pay for your lies and hypocrisies.

-reprinted from the Guardian

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