

The rubber gloves are on! March for women's rights amid cuts ^[1]



Author: Davies, Lizzy

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of demonstrators will take to the streets in rubber gloves, headscarves and full-skirted frocks on Saturday to protest against government cuts which they say are hitting women disproportionately hard and risk setting the battle for equality back decades.

In what it describes as its first nationwide "call to arms" in nearly a century-and-a-half of activism, the **Fawcett Society** is urging people to **turn out in 1950s gear** ^[3] for a march past Downing Street aimed at telling David Cameron not to let austerity measures "**turn back time**" ^[4] on women's rights. Similar rallies in other cities, including Coventry, Bristol and Manchester, are to culminate in tea parties. In Oxford, a 1950s-themed "flash mob" is to take place: the most committed participants are urged to come in handcuffs with which they can chain themselves "to the kitchen sink".

For an organisation which tends to shy away from more raucous feminist tactics in favour of measured, persistent campaigning, Fawcett's Day of Action is a departure. But, in a week when the number of women out of work across the country hit a 23-year high of 1.09 million, Fawcett's acting chief executive, Anna Bird, said there was no time to lose.

"We think we are very much at a watershed moment for women's rights in the UK," she said. "We think that the impact of austerity has brought us to a tipping point where, while we have got used to steady progress towards greater equality, we're now seeing a risk of slipping backwards. We cannot afford to let that happen."

The warning comes amid growing concern that women will be hit hardest by cuts to benefits and public services such as SureStart children's centres, and will be more likely to take on roles plugging the gap once such state services have been withdrawn.

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For Saturday's march, activists all over the country will be rallying support. Chloe Cook, 20, the head of Bournemouth Students' Feminist Society, said she and her friends had been inspired to take action at last weekend's Fem 11 conference in London. "This is probably the most important feminist cause for British women to fight for right now. We need to remind the government that 'women's issues' aren't just 'women's issues'. They are society's issues," she said.

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After months of criticism, the government shows signs of waking up to concerns about the impact of the cuts on women. In September, a leaked memo revealed that Downing Street was considering a raft of measures aimed at winning back female voters. Earlier this month the home secretary, Theresa May, outlined an ambitious plan to recruit and train 5,000 volunteer business mentors to help budding female entrepreneurs. This week it emerged that Cameron is seeking to hire a special adviser to check whether policy is "women-friendly".

Bird welcomed this recognition but said the government had failed so far to take action that would really make a difference. Fawcett has outlined policies it wants the government to take, including the ringfencing of funding for SureStart children's centres and pressure on local authorities not to cut services concerned with combating violence against women.

For Cowan, the government's apparent concern is too little, too late. "[It's] locking the stable door after the horse has bolted," she said. "The damage has been done. It doesn't make you feel any better that they recognise that there might be some harm there after they've inflicted the harm on all of us."

- reprinted from the Guardian

Region: Europe ^[5]

Tags: advocacy ^[6]

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