



## Why I marched

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This collaborative piece shares blog posts from a number of authors, activists and researchers who attended the Women's March 2017.

### Elizabeth Ablett

Bio: Elizabeth Ablett is a third year Sociology PhD student at the University of Warwick. Her thesis explores the (re)production of gender inequalities amongst local politicians in the UK. [e.ablett@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:e.ablett@warwick.ac.uk)

Blog: My decision to join the Women's March was a straightforward one: it felt monumentally important to be in solidarity with all those affected by Trump's racist and misogynistic discourses and policies, and to show our government that any alignment with him should be firmly rejected. But, as with any political action, there were debates around the march of which I was aware and which made me potentially wary. I'd felt uneasy after reading reports on the US march's organisation and aims: did I want to march in solidarity with a protest whose statement, if even for a short while, [excluded the voices of sex workers](#)? How inclusive would the London march turn out to be when some of the symbolism and imagery were being [contested](#)? The march, and the debates around it, show the importance of a feminist politics that emphasises self-awareness, one that questions the language we use and is always asking who is being excluded in a particular

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moment or space. Developing and embedding intersectional feminist politics within these marches and the movements that evolve from them is vital, especially at this particular juncture in global politics. We must be attentive to exclusions and denounce discrimination in all its forms, particular when it occurs within our movements. What symbols should define our movement(s)? What is the right language to use? It is perfectly legitimate, indeed it is *necessary*, to feel galvanised, motivated, and hopeful about the march whilst also questioning who spoke, what was said, and what was done.

There are many reasons which preclude women or minority groups' participation in politics and/or protest: not knowing anyone involved in activism, for example, or simply having to concentrate on getting on with other aspects of life, work or child raising. Exposure to activist groups or protests can also feel daunting; I'm hardly an experienced activist, but some of the marches and activist meetings I've attended over the years have left me feeling all at sea. Why is everyone suddenly waving their hands around in unison at a feminist collective? Why, as a 17 year old going along to see what an annual Marxism meeting was all about (my first and last dalliance with the Socialist Workers Party), was this bloke talking over me after I'd finally plucked up the courage to speak? In the past, experiences like this led me to feeling apprehensive about further participation, about saying the wrong thing, of not using the right language. One thing I have learnt is that the unease and frustration I felt in these situations is politically important. Emotions like this tell us something about how power is operating in that space or moment and how we're positioned in relation to it.

For many women, that day marked a turning point in their participation with politics; when not participating no longer seemed an option. Such enthusiasm should be applauded and encouraged, but this has not always been the case. Should there have been more working class women, (dis)abled, non-binary, Trans or women of colour speaking? Always! Will those who

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marched be at the next Black Lives Matter or Yarl's Wood protests? I very much hope so. But radicalisation is a process. People don't just wake up with radical politics, but become more radical through education and by interacting with radical people and participating in radical spaces. If those who have already diagnosed the world's ills meet newcomers with scorn, the likelihood is that people will be put off and movements remain stagnant. Perhaps the march wasn't politically 'perfect', as arguably none could or should be, but it overwhelmingly succeeded in being a creative, angry, inclusive, frustrated, messy and beautiful space; a testament to the ability of people to come together across differences and protest at the many people and issues that Trump threatens.

I hope that the energy and positivity of the day translates to more people organising, to more people listening and learning from each other and to fighting together. We also shouldn't downplay or ignore the affective power of solidarity and protest; marching together can make you feel good, feel powerful, and feel supported, even if you think Trump won't sit up and notice. And when it is so easy to slide into despondency or hopelessness as a result of his rhetoric and actions, such positive emotions, experienced collectively, are vitally important political acts in and of themselves.

Janet Mock spoke powerfully on these issues at one of the US marches. You can watch her full speech [here](#).

*'So we are here. We are here not merely to gather but to move, right? And our movements, our movements require us to do more than just show up and say the right words. It requires us to break out of our comfort zones and be confrontational. It requires us to defend one another when it is difficult and dangerous. It requires us to truly see ourselves and one another.'*

[...]

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*Our approach to freedom need not be identical but it must be intersectional and inclusive. It must extend beyond ourselves. I know with surpassing certainty that my liberation is directly linked to the liberation of the undocumented trans Latina yearning for refuge. The disabled student seeking unequivocal access. The sex worker fighting to make her living safely.'*

### **Elsa T. Oommen**

*Bio: Elsa T. Oommen is a final year doctoral student at the University of Warwick. Her doctoral project explores Tier-5 Youth Mobility Scheme of the UK immigration policy.*

### **Why I participated in the women's march?**

This question can only be answered from a reflective standpoint where I first situate myself within the intersecting relations of power that shape my existence. So, that begs the question- Who am I? I am 'two persons' in my life in two locations: my current country of residence- UK and my country of origin – India. In the UK, I am a doctoral researcher and a migrant woman of colour. In India, I hail from the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, where I grew up in the homogenous cultural landscape of Kerala, which is known for its high female literacy, favourable sex ratio and a strong work culture among women. Notwithstanding these social indicators of human development, the women I look up to in my family (be it my grandmother who was an engineer or my aunt who is an official in the education department), largely abided by patriarchal gendered norms. These unsaid rules and regulations later became the pillar of my continued academic interest in feminist traditions of enquiry and practice.

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### **So, why did I march?**

All the identities that 'make me' demanded I do it. First, it was problematic for me to justify my decision to participate in the march. It made me question my own standpoint – what is my political stand? The march was organised against the manifest portrayal of misogyny and racism that preceded and succeeded the US presidential elections. Does my participation in the march mean that I choose to show outrage when Western liberal values are affected? Am I playing into a false sense of belonging to a common civic order based firmly in the West? These are difficult questions and I could either show support or not. Well, to put it simply, I participated because I identify as a woman above all differences that separate the cause of women. As a migrant woman, I also related with the system of fear against minorities, refugees and immigrants. It was also vital to realise that abstaining from the march would mean that there is no conversation, resulting in a pattern of complacency, which is worse. I also believe I have every reason to stand up for women and oppressed minorities and take every opportunity to express my solidarity against the rising normalisation of misogyny and racism.

### **Do I pretend things will change with a one-off march?**

No. I don't. But that certainly does not preclude the need for practices of resistance. They must be undertaken despite the triviality or lack of immediate outcome. As one of my well-meaning friends who did not believe anything could actually come out of the march (because of his inherent cynicism in a generation that looks for instant gratification) asked me about my participation in the march – 'You had fun. Didn't you?'. Yes, I certainly enjoyed being part of the march, the sense of solidarity and hope it provided me. This question also triggered my interest in a writing which used the sociological concept of [collective effervescence](#) in the context of women's' march. It made me wonder if the act of solidarity and standing up for a cause can

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indeed be explained through Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence, which he used to explain the basis of religions in his treatise *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1995 [1912]). Here, Durkheim argued that activities which centred around the 'sacred' (rituals including totems or symbolically revered figures in the form of dead ancestors or collective representation of god) brought about 'collective effervescence'- a feeling of togetherness or commonality despite the possible differences. Later, Robert Merton used a distinction between manifest function and latent function in his work *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968 [1957]) to showcase the latent functions that sustained group activities. For example, in the context of women's march, one could argue that the latent function that was getting served is group cohesion or perhaps women's need to express solidarity, or even a reason to have 'fun'. However, the context of the march does not adequately explain the reductive lens of feeling good or feeling connection. At the root of it are genuine concerns about loss of hard won rights and freedoms. As a woman who marched on the day, I can certainly tell that it was not a sense of coming together for an abstract idea. It was living the fears and marching in solidarity with women and minorities in the USA and all over the world. I wish that we continue to resist and find ways to cultivate joy in a world that is seemingly in the throes of violence, bigotry, racism and misogyny.

### References:

- Durkheim, E. (1995 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Merton, R.K. (1968 [1957]) *Social theory and social structure*. New York: The Free Press.



### **Why I marched – Dr Anne Benmore**

I took to the streets on Saturday to stand up for all I believe in, as a woman and a human being. Since June 24<sup>th</sup> and November 9<sup>th</sup> last year, I've never felt so fearful about the future as I do now. If parallels with the 1930s hold any sway, we only have about 5 years before the unthinkable. I simply cannot stand by and let that happen. I owe it to previous and future generations to protect all that we have today. Like a lot of women, I felt the time had come to act instead of just getting angry and despondent. So I marched. To stand up for tolerance and respect for others, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, religion or physical ability. To give an alternative to bullying bigoted hate propaganda. To stop the world from sliding back 100 years. To not let evil prevail. And being alongside all those millions of like-minded people, right across the globe, gave me a level of hope and optimism I never thought possible just a week ago. I came away elated, and haven't stopped smiling since. I know it is just the start, but I now feel empowered to carry on supporting the resistance movement that came into being on Saturday. Women, *en masse*, have fought for peace and justice throughout the ages and we can do it again. Trump may come to rue the day he made a causal remark about sexually abusing women. But for now, he and his ilk can rest assured that we're not going quietly; in fact we're not going at all. I'm immensely proud to have been part of 'history in the making' on Saturday. To paraphrase one placard, 'Love *will* trump hate'.

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## **Why I marched – Heather Griffiths**

Bio: Heather Griffiths is a third year PhD in Sociology researching flexible work and work-life balance policies in the finance sector.

#WhyIMarch: this was my first protest; my first attempt at being a little bit radical and taking my politics out of the office and into public. Of all the rallies that have come and gone over the last few years the meanings behind this one got me fired up, compelled me to leave the house, spend my student stipend on a train ticket to London and get the hell on to the streets.

I was desperate to go – this was the right event to cut my protest teeth on, and now I doubt it will be my last. People are still asking what the point of it was, and I am still struggling to articulate that, but the result was awe-inspiring and something to feel very proud of. And it got everyone's attention that's for sure!

I have wanted to take my activism to the next level and this time I felt passionate enough, and importantly safe and welcome enough, to do it. Protests can be daunting places, but my experience at the Women's March London was just bloody lovely. It was anger, hate, frustration, disbelief, and an incredulous amount of passion, repackaged as solidarity and love, wrapped up in a pussy bow.

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## **Kate Mahoney**

**Bio:** I am a final year doctoral student based at the Centre for the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick. I research the women's movement and mental health activism in late twentieth century England.

It felt like I didn't make a decision as to whether I should take part in the Women's March. Rather, my attendance seemed mandatory. Prior to the march I struggled to believe that Trump, a candidate who ran a campaign fuelled by racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism, who championed sexual harassment and flagrantly conflated fact and fiction, was President of the United States.

The Women's March served as a vital wakeup call for me- a hugely potent reminder that Trump's position of power presents an immediate threat to the livelihoods and freedoms of millions of individuals. I felt that the March gave people the opportunity to express their anger, frustration and disbelief in a public and supportive space. The variety and humour of sentiments creatively expressed on protestors' signs reassured me that I was not alone in feeling a sometimes toxic combination of emotions in response to Trump's ascendancy. Marching with thousands of likeminded activists demonstrated how these emotions can be drawn on to enact solidarity and inspire opposition. I felt this acutely as I marched with friends who I have previously organised feminist events with and women who I had just met.

Since the Women's March I have read numerous articles that question where the '[millions of white people who turned out were when Black Lives Matter activists were being assaulted for protesting anti-black police brutality, or on behalf of Standing Rock and Flint, Michigan](#)'. These responses caused me to reflect on why I felt like the Women's March was an event that I could and should attend. Self-awareness remains intrinsic to the development of a genuinely

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intersectional feminist opposition to Trump's politics at community and governmental levels; a resistance that strives to recognise the myriad of causes that his presidency threatens and does not champion certain issues to the detriment of other marginalised voices being heard.

### **Louise Mahoney**

**Bio:** I am a counsellor who supports female and male survivors of sexual and domestic abuse.

For me it was vitally important to be physically present. I wanted to make a stand and to make my voice heard in opposition to what is going on at the moment. I felt that I had achieved this by being there. It was a very personal reason but in being with so many other people, it gave even more meaning and resonance to the event.

### **Terry Mahoney**

**Bio:** I am a company director in a heating products and services business.

My daughter Kate let me know about the Women's March in London which she was planning to take part in along with my wife. I decided to participate too, as did our son also. Once I knew about the march, it would've taken a lot for me not to be there.

Why?

Donald Trump is an unashamedly abhorrent individual. There is overwhelming evidence of his misdeeds including a recorded confession of his serial abuse of women. These shortcomings should deny him public office of any shape or form whatsoever. Instead, they have been ignored by those who voted for him and subsequently elect him President of the United States. His victory

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has been overtly celebrated by Nigel Farage and he has been interviewed by Michael Gove on behalf of the Times, coincidentally two of the three most prominent UK politicians who led the Leave the EU Campaign

I was not eligible to vote on the US Presidential Election. My vote and my passionate hope that the UK would remain in the EU were thwarted by those who voted to leave.

As a result Donald Trump has come to embody much of who and what I find offensive and disturbing in politics today. When I was made aware of a demonstration against Donald Trump I did not hesitate.