

21 January 2017 - Women's Marches: from protest to movement?

Wednesday 25 January 2017, by [DUGGAN Penelope](#) (Date first published: 24 January 2017).

“Over the next months and years we will be called upon to intensify our demands for social justice, to become more militant in our defense of vulnerable populations. Those who still defend the supremacy of white male hetero-patriarchy had better watch out.

“The next 1,459 days of the Trump administration will be 1,459 days of resistance: Resistance on the ground, resistance in the classrooms, resistance on the job, resistance in our art and in our music.

“This is just the beginning and in the words of the inimitable Ella Baker, ‘We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.’ Thank you.” This was Angela Davis concluding her remarks at the Women's March on Washington on 21 January 2017 [\[1\]](#).

The worldwide women's marches on 21 January 2017 were a historic event.

- For the first time since the anti-war demonstrations of 15 February 2003, millions of people in different countries and on all seven continents demonstrated on the same day and for the same reasons, both in a gesture of international solidarity but also an understanding how the same political dynamics are at play internationally. [\[2\]](#)
- In the US the level of mobilization outstripped the 2003 anti-war demonstrations and in Britain rivalled that level.
- The marches were initiated and led by and mobilized majoritarily women. While the spark was the election of Trump as US president and reaction to the announced and probable attacks on women's rights in that country under his administration, the international response was also provoked by the attacks and fears of attacks on those same rights by women around the world. The rising tides of far right and religious reaction are underlining the fact that women's rights - to choose, to work, to live their lives as they wish - are never definitely won.
- While the impetus came from women - of all ages, women of colour, ethnic minority women, migrant women, women with disabilities - defending their rights, the marches also mobilized those concerned by the attacks to come from the Trump administration - and similar political forces around the world - on migrants' rights, on Black rights, on the environment.
- In the US the mobilization had a truly mass nature - as is witnessed by the list of mobilizations that has been compiled. [\[3\]](#) Even the protests of a few dozen, indeed sometimes a few individuals, are recorded, showing the extent to which the desire to stand up and be counted against Trump and his policies sank deep.

Of course such a spontaneous mobilization was extremely heterogeneous, bringing into the same marches radical feminists, Democrats and Clinton supporters, Black rights activists, radical

anticapitalist left forces.... That was an enormous achievement notably in the US, but also at a worldwide level.

Some left commentators because of this have tended to dismiss the significance of these demonstrations, arguing that they were dominated by bourgeois, white, liberal, pro-Democrat forces. That such forces were present and may well have taken the initiative is undeniable. But all the reports from around the world underline the fact that many, many of the demonstrators were young, spontaneous and new to mobilizing. What could be a worse tactic for the diverse feminist, anti-capitalist left than to leave those people only in dialogue with liberal, mainstream, institutional feminists? As Susan Pashkoff writing for *Socialist Resistance* in Britain says: *It is essential that socialist feminists and the left participate in this movement and not just criticise from the outside. We need to be there, shifting the boundaries further to the left, to support the demands of working class women, women of colour, LGBTQ comrades and disabled women. We need to make certain that this potential movement is not seized by those that would subvert its aims to further the needs of mainstream political parties and the liberal feminist movement.* [4]

The need for the marches to be of all women, and in particular those that suffer, and have suffered, the most sharply from oppression, exploitation and discrimination, that is Black and ethnic minority women, LGBTQ people, disabled women, working-class women, was expressed strongly from the outset. The “Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles” in the US were far broader than those of liberal feminism and addressed the demands and struggles of women of colour and working class women. [5] Real efforts were made to ensure that the organizers (co-chairs) [6] at a national level in the US reflected this diversity, but as with any living movement such efforts will have to continue if an ongoing movement is to develop out of this surge of protest.

Pashkoff pointed out “If you expect this nascent movement to understand the fact that it is at the intersections of race, class and gender that women’s oppression is felt the hardest, then we need to be there ensuring that the voices of women of colour, working class women, LGBTQ people, and disabled women are heard and their demands are taken on board. It is a nascent movement, if you expect that they will not make errors or put out wrong slogans, you are asking far too much.” Nevertheless the movement, if it is to grow in to the powerful protest movement for social justice called for by Angela Davis in her speech in Washington, will have to go beyond this organized diversity to become an expression of the fights and struggles of women against all forms of oppression, exploitation and discrimination. [7]

But movements take time and effort to grow and to build. As the Marxist feminist author Cinzia Arruzza wrote on 22 January:

Mass mobilizations almost never begin when we expect them, almost never have the features we would expect or consider as politically adequate, almost never have political coherence, they are not free of the social contradictions and divisions that are present in society, or of the cultural prejudices and political shortcomings that characterize them. They are not magical events disconnected from the continuum of social life, although they have the capacity and potentiality of creating discontinuity and breaks. They are messy, contradictory processes, where the outcomes are not given in advance and solidarity is something to be achieved. The last 48 hours have shown the potentiality for a new season of mass mobilization, and that this happened especially in a day of women’s mobilizations is even more relevant. Of course, a possible, perhaps likely, scenario is that the Democratic Party and its surrogates will end up taming, coopting and eventually kill this potentiality. But the relevant decision we should make is whether we want to already sing the funeral eulogy of a mobilization that could be or whether we want to be true to our desire to change this world and have a serious non-moralistic political analysis of the limitations, composition and potential of these last two days, and of what we should do and how in order to help the growth and

radicalization of the struggle. [8]

That is the challenge facing feminist, anti-capitalist forces in the US and around the world in the wake of this wave of protest. What is at stake, and also the possibilities opened up, are undoubtedly greater in the immediate in the US. But as women around the world fight to defend and extend their rights, this protest movement is a sign of the possibilities to build their own movements, whether for the right to abortion in Ireland and Poland, against violence in India and South Africa, against femicide in Mexico and for women's rights as human rights everywhere.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Thursday 19 January 2017 19.17 GMT Last modified on Monday 23 January 2017 10.06 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/19/womens-march-washington-occupy-protest>

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Footnotes

[1] Speech available on ESSF (article 40083), [Speech at the Women's March on Washington: History cannot be deleted like web pages](#).

[2] Many photos, videos and articles have reported on the demonstrations. For a taste see *The Huffington Post* "[38 Stunning Photos From Women's Marches Around The World](#)".

[3] See [here](#).

[4] Susan Pashkoff, ESSF (article 40095), [January 21 Women's Marches: Are we witnessing a moment or a movement?](#). See on the routes proposed for the movement: "May the angry women return home the day after the march to lead us toward a women-led hybrid movement-party in every state that is disciplined enough to govern, militantly local and single-mindedly devoted to actualizing a force capable of seizing control of city councils and mayorships during midterm elections across America in preparation for an electoral coup against the presidency in 2020.", Micah White, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2017, "[Without a path from protest to power, the Women's March will end up like Occupy](#)". Experiences as varied as those of the PT in municipal government in Brazil and Podemos in the Spanish state have shown that it is not so easy to wield "power" even at a municipal level.

[5] See the “Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles” [here](#).

[6] See [here](#).

[7] The organizers have understood this point and are addressing it in their fashion, see Susan Chira and Jonathan Martin, 22 January 2017 *New York Times*, [“After Success of Women’s March, a Question Remains: What’s Next?”](#).

[8] Cinzia Arruzza is author of “Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism” available [here](#).