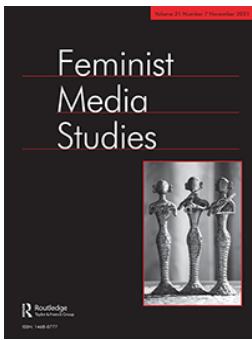


It's what the suffragettes would have wanted: the construction of the suffragists and suffragettes on Mumsnet.

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“It’s what the suffragettes would have wanted”: the construction of the suffragists and suffragettes on Mumsnet

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ABSTRACT

The image of the historical campaign for votes for women is continually reinvigorated and reinvested with meaning by later feminists. An investigation into the ways in which the campaign is framed on the UK online parenting forum Mumsnet demonstrates clearly how women in the 21st century use their feminist foremothers to support their own political purposes. In particular, gender-critical feminists on Mumsnet are able to performatively invoke their suffragette heritage as militant, radical feminists, and imbue their cause with legitimacy. Use of suffragette pen names and WSPU colours allows gender-critical posters to identify each other both on and offline. Discussion of the campaign on Mumsnet demonstrates a good amount of knowledge, including distinctions between the contributions of militant and constitutional campaigners. Nonetheless, when the discussion turns to the necessity for women to vote, the dominance of the image of the suffering suffragette becomes clear. However, the suffragettes can also be used as justification for women *not* using their vote: as long as this is framed as a thoughtful decision, made out of anger at the political choices available, it can be presented as “what the suffragettes would have wanted”.

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Introduction

The figure of the suffragette has returned once more to the pages of UK newspapers. Women wearing the purple, green and white colours of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) or dressed in Edwardian costumes with suffrage sashes stood outside the Scottish Parliament in September 2021 demanding First Minister Nicola Sturgeon listen to them; judges have been asked to rule on whether handkerchiefs in the same colours should be banned from court (September 2018); Twitter accounts incorporate the colours in the profiles of users with names such as “Sister Suffragette” or “Northern Suffragette” or use the personas of real-life suffragettes such as “Emily Wilding Davison”. Photographs of Emmeline Pankhurst being arrested or suffragettes in court are presented on social media to illustrate claims that women’s rights are once more under threat in the UK—that women are being persecuted by the police as

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the suffragettes were (see for example Dana Vitalosova 2020). In Scotland, a woman was taken to court charged with sending offensive tweets, including an image of a bow in suffragette colours (charges were discontinued in October 2021).

All of the incidents described above are associated with what is usually described as “gender-critical” feminism in the UK and focus on the heated debate around the issue of women’s sex-based rights in light of government plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act (2004). The connection between gender-critical feminists and suffragette colours is made by both the campaigners themselves and those that oppose them. In June 2021 historian Fern Riddell tweeted “At some point UK feminism is going to need to address how transphobic hate has stolen the colours of the suffragettes to identify themselves”.

This article uses a space that is acknowledged as one of the key online centres of gender-critical feminism in the UK—the feminism discussion boards of the parenting website Mumsnet (Helen Joyce 2021; Sarah Pedersen 2020)—in order to investigate this use of the figure of the suffragette in British women’s contemporary political discourse. It investigates the way in which users of the boards frame the suffragists and suffragettes, and the use they make of their understanding of history to justify their own approach and activism around contemporary political issues, particularly those related to GRA reform.

Background

In 2016, a report on Trans Equality by the Women and Equalities Select Committee of the House of Commons recommended the reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2004), including the adoption of the principle of Gender Self-identification so that a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) could be achieved more simply and quickly. In 2018—and in part in response to campaigning by grassroots women’s groups about the need to address how such reforms might impact on the rights of women and girls—the UK government ran a public consultation on how to reform the GRA. These women’s grassroots groups are usually described as gender-critical feminists, although not all identify with this term. Their opponents, in what has become an increasingly heated debate both on and off social media, are more likely to refer to them as transphobes or TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists). At the same time as the Westminster consultation, the Scottish government ran a similar consultation because gender recognition is a devolved matter. Both consultations covered issues such as whether and how the process of achieving legal recognition should be amended, for example whether the current requirement for a medical diagnosis should be removed so that self-identification becomes all that is necessary to achieve a GRC. The Scottish consultation also raised the question of the minimum age at which applications for gender recognition could be made, with the possibility that it could be reduced to sixteen. Boris Johnson’s Conservative government in Westminster put any plans to reform the GRA “on ice” in February 2020 (BBC news, February 12th 2020) and in September 2020 the Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, announced that the government would not introduce self-identification, although the price of an application for a GRC would be reduced and the procedure would go online (Government Equalities Office 2020). In contrast, in September 2021, the Scottish Government announced that it would be pushing ahead with a Gender Recognition Reform Bill in its programme for government 2021–22 (Scottish Government 2021).

The feminism topic of the discussion boards of the UK parenting site Mumsnet has become an active site for gender-critical discussion about the proposed reforms and on the wider subject of potential impacts on the rights of women and girls (Sarah Pedersen 2020). Its commitment to free speech on this topic has marked Mumsnet out as different from many other parts of the public sphere. On Twitter, for example, gender-critical women, such as the Canadian writer and founder of *Feminist Current*, Megan Murphy, found themselves censored and then banned. Reddit closed down its gender-critical feminism sub-reddit in July 2020. Mumsnet's policy of allowing gender-critical discussion, albeit with more monitoring and censorship on the feminism boards than the rest of the site, has led to criticism, lawsuits and a series of campaigns to persuade advertisers to stop spending money on the site (for example see Daniel Farey-Jones 2019; News Media Association 2018). Mumsnet has therefore played a central role in the formation and continuance of gender-critical discourse in the UK, and its feminism discussion boards in particular have a symbiotic relationship with many of the gender-critical grassroots organisations that have grown up in the last five years, such as Woman's Place UK, Fair Play for Women and For Women Scotland (Helen Joyce 2021; Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent 2020). While some have celebrated the site's role in this discussion, others have criticised what is perceived to be the site's transphobic culture—Mumsnet has been denounced as a “toxic hotbed of transphobia” (Eve Livingston, *Vice*, 2018). Edie Miller wrote on *The Outline* in 2018 that “Mumsnet is to British transphobia more like what 4Chan is to American fascism”. While most of these accusations have focused on the feminism boards of the site, at the same time, scholars such as Angela McRobbie 2013 and Tracey Jensen 2013 have criticised Mumsnet as a whole as embodying a type of neoliberal feminism that prioritises individualised, self-reflexive parenting focused on the concept of the good mother. McRobbie suggests that the Mumsnet ideal of middle-class feminism works to marginalise and discredit less privileged women.

What is clear is that Mumsnet is a place where UK women discuss contemporary political issues. The site has previously been used as a data source for assessments of political discussion in the UK (Daniel Jackson, Richard Scullion and Mike Molesworth 2013), while Freddy Fallon, Andy Williamson and Mark Pack 2011 point out that sites like Mumsnet demonstrate that women are discussing politics online in places that would traditionally be perceived as non-political. Non-political third spaces, such as Mumsnet and Netmums in the UK and Baby Center in the US, offer women the opportunity to access news, including on current affairs and politics, both through links to original news articles and, more frequently, through summaries and the ensuing debates (Todd Graham, Daniel Jackson and Scott Wright 2016; Meera Selva and Simge Andi 2020).

This article investigates the use of the suffragette as an aspirational figure by participants on Mumsnet's feminism boards and the wider site, against whom contemporary women need to measure themselves and their actions. This is particularly in reference to using their vote. However, perhaps more interestingly, the suffragette can also be used to justify *not* voting in cases where women have found it impossible to choose between equally problematic candidates, describing themselves as politically homeless. It also discusses direct statements of identification with the suffragettes made by gender-critical users of Mumsnet, who have found themselves castigated by sections of the press and public opinion as being trans-exclusionary or even transphobic. Several of the Mumsnet discussions on the topic of the UK and Scottish governments' proposed reforms

of the GRA identify the position of gender-critical feminists as analogous to that of the suffragettes, and sometimes also identify more liberal feminists as suffragists and critics as anti-suffragists. Katharine Cockin 2004 points out that the figure of the suffragette is perpetually being reinvented in British popular culture, and it is clear that a further reinvention is taking place on some parts of Mumsnet in order to position gender-critical feminists within a tradition of “courageous” but also “difficult” women.

Of course, to some extent it is not surprising that a section of feminists within the UK has re-embraced the image of the suffragette in recent years given that 2018 saw extensive commemorations of the centenary of the partial achievement of the Parliamentary vote for women. Films, radio and television programmes, statues and exhibitions rightly celebrated this important milestone in women’s history. As Nicoletta Gullace 2021 notes, in contrast to more muted celebrations of the achievement of women’s suffrage in the US in 2020, which raised questions relating to the conflicts between racial justice and gender equality and the marginalisation of Black women suffragists and also happened during a pandemic, the 2018 celebrations in the UK were for the most part unambiguously positive. The roles of both the constitutional suffragists and the militant suffragettes were explained and celebrated, and the suffragettes in particular were presented to the public as heroines fighting for their rights.

This article discusses how, through their discussion of the history of the women’s suffrage campaign, posters on Mumsnet demonstrate a comparatively good understanding of the history of the campaign for the votes for women, and also an appetite to learn more. They also demonstrate a need to use historical precedents to support their own positions on political issues, even to the extent of moulding the figure of the suffragette until she supports women *not* using their vote.

Methodology

The UK parenting website Mumsnet is a popular site predominantly used by women, not all of whom are mothers (Selva et al. 2020). The site was established in 2000 and now attracts around 7 million unique visitors per month, who make 100 million page views (Mumsnet 2021). Mumsnet is perceived as being influential with middle-class women, which has led to frequent webchats with leaders of political parties and ministers wishing to promote policy relating to families (Karen Ross, et al. 2013). The 2010 general election was referred to in the press as the “Mumsnet election” because of the frequency of Mumsnet webchats by politicians (Rosie Campbell and Oliver Heath 2017). Mumsnetters are known for their articulate, albeit somewhat aggressive, conversation style, their campaigns on a variety of subjects related to the well-being of women and girls, and, in recent years, the adoption of gender-critical feminism on some parts of the site (Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson 2013). There are over 100 separate topics on the discussion boards of Mumsnet, ranging from the more obvious parenting topics of weaning, breast-feeding and giving birth, to television programmes, the environment, cars, politics and current affairs. However, entry to the discussion boards is via a list of “Trending Threads”, allowing users to access the most active threads regardless of topic. Threads on a particular subject can run to up to 1000 posts, after which posters need to start a new thread if they wish to continue the discussion. The site is a private limited company that in 2018 recorded a revenue of £8.6 million, the majority of this coming from advertising

(Digiday.com 2020). Like many other media companies, Mumsnet saw a decline in profits during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as its page views rose by 10% (Digiday.com 2020). The site therefore introduced a paid membership model to raise revenue from users for the first time in 2020. It employs over 100 members of staff, mainly as paid moderators. These are post-moderators, which means that comments are not pre-vetted before being published on the site.

Mumsnet archives its threads, and this archive is easily searchable. Previous researchers have used the archive to examine a wide variety of topics discussed by Mumsnetters, from headlice and breastfeeding to zombie attacks and sex (Kate Boyer 2018; Christine Hine 2014; Marcus Leaning 2015; Sarah Pedersen 2014). This article focuses on discussion on the “Feminism” sections of the discussion boards on Mumsnet, and is part of a wider study of political and feminist discussion on the site over the last ten years by the author. The feminism topic is a comparatively new topic on Mumsnet, having been established in 2010 after requests from site users. The wider site often runs campaigns relating to issues such as the need for better miscarriage care, for companies to publish their parental-leave policies, and the ban of sales representatives from hospital maternity wards. But it also campaigns on what might be perceived as wider feminist issues such as the Mumsnet “We Believe Her” campaign of 2012, which was a response to the many site users who had asked Mumsnet to speak out about the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in women’s lives, or the “Let Girls be Girls” campaign, which focused on the imposition of adult sexuality on young girls, particularly in relation to clothing.

Threads discussing issues relating to GRA reform, local and general elections, women’s sex-based rights, webchats with women politicians, and women’s political history have been identified and analysed to identify key themes as part of this longer study. This article arises from the identification of a strong theme relating to the figure of the suffragette within discussion on the feminism boards. These threads were then augmented by a series of keyword searches in relation to the names of key suffragists and suffragettes and terms such as suffrage, WSPU, suffragette, suffragist, using the advanced search function on Mumsnet and following previous researchers’ data-collection methods (see for example Nichola Phillips and Anne Broderick 2014; David Matley 2020). This generated a dataset of nearly 500 posts.

The research builds on the work of Red Chidgey (Red Chidgey 2015, Red Chidgey 2018), who has investigated some of the everyday ways in which memories of the women’s suffrage campaign circulate, for example in feminist blogs. Chidgey suggests that the women’s suffrage movement continues to be reinvested with meanings today and serves as a potent political symbol. This article argues that this is particularly true in relation to the gender-critical feminist posters on Mumsnet, who have identified themselves with the suffragettes and their detractors with both the suffragists and the anti-suffragists.

Feminist forebears

How much knowledge about the campaign for women’s suffrage is demonstrated by Mumsnet posters, and what sort of knowledge is this? Many of the posters who referenced the campaign for votes for women demonstrated more than superficial knowledge about the history of the suffrage campaign and individual campaigners. This was

particularly true of posts made during and after 2018, when the centenary of (some) women achieving the Parliamentary vote was celebrated in the UK via television programmes, museum exhibitions, public works of art, festivals and other events. The majority of posters who referenced the campaign for the vote for women demonstrated a good amount of knowledge about the campaign, for example a clear understanding of the distinction made by historians between the constitutional and militant sides. Indeed, some posters admitted to feeling angry when others used the term *suffragette* incorrectly to cover all campaigners. In 2018 one poster snapped: “just what is WRONG with people that they’ll mither on about their love for Millicent Fawcett and *then call her a suffragette?!’*” In 2011 another argued that “the suffragists did more than the suffragettes in the specifics of achieving votes for women”. These clear statements of understanding of the different groupings within the women’s suffrage campaign in the UK are in direct contrast to the findings of previous scholars. In 1995, Laura Mayhall identified the “stranglehold of the Women’s Social and Political Union on the historical imagination” (Laura E. N. Mayhall 1995, 320), arguing that the suffragettes dominated both scholarly and non-academic discussions of the pre-war women’s suffrage movement. The 2012 opening ceremony for the London Olympics, for example, included 80 suffragettes, led by Mrs Pankhurst, and referenced the death of Emily Wilding Davison, while a 2002 BBC poll of “Great Britons” placed Emmeline Pankhurst at number 27 (Jill Liddington 2005). Similarly, Krista Cowman’s analysis of discussion of the suffrage campaign in the 1970s feminist magazine *Spare Rib* found little discussion of suffrage as a political movement but instead a focus on individual personalities, with a concentration on the WSPU and Emmeline Pankhurst. It is clear from Mumsnet discussion of women’s suffrage that a wider conception of the suffrage campaign is in general circulation on the site, and Mumsnet posters demonstrated clear knowledge of the existence of distinctions between constitutional and militant societies, particularly after the celebrations of the 2018 centenary. “Is it too simplistic to say both worked in tandem to effect the changes made for women’s liberation?” (Mumsnet poster May 2018).

However, Laura E. N. Mayhall (1995) also found that the definition of militancy in circulation in 1995 equated it with the material practices of the WSPU, such as window-breaking, arson and hunger-striking, rather than the practices of other militant groups such as the refusal to pay taxes organised by the Women’s Tax Resistance League or the evasion of the 1911 census, which was originated by the Women’s Freedom League (WFL). This remains true of the Mumsnet dataset. There is only one specific mention of either of these organisations—a poster in May 2019 who stated “Suffragettes, suffragists, WFL—there was infighting then too but they all helped women’s liberation gain traction”—and any mention of the census boycott of 1911 is referred to as being by “suffragettes” in general. This is similar to Chidgey’s findings relating to knowledge about the suffragettes on the feminist blog for young women *The F-Word*, and reflects Mayhall’s suggestion that members of other militant groups, such as the WFL and United Suffragists, had to identify with the WSPU and a more generalised “suffragette spirit” in post-war years in order to become part of the history of the movement.

There is little mention of specific militant leaders in Mumsnet discussion apart from the Pankhursts, either in or outside the WSPU. In 2012 one poster noted that (WSPU treasurer and financier) Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence was “much more interesting than Emmeline Pankhurst but largely forgotten” while another poster in 2010 described working-class

suffragette Annie Kenney as “a suffragette who heckled Winston Churchill”. Krista Cowman’s analysis of the second-wave feminist magazine *Spare Rib* similarly found an emphasis on “a small number of charismatic leaders” (Krista Cowman 2010, 202) in the discussion of the suffrage campaign in the magazine. There is also little to no appreciation in Mumsnet discussion of the fact that many suffrage campaigners might belong to or financially support both constitutional and militant organisations, and that relationships between organisations in localities might be collaborative and nuanced.

Identifying as suffragists

Discussion of the suffrage campaign often led to a statement of how the poster would have identified herself if she had been alive at that time. Interestingly, a majority of commentators on this subject felt they would have been suffragists rather than suffragettes, and there was a general agreement of the value of the constitutional suffragist campaign: “I think the -ists made at least as much a contribution as the -ettes and don’t generally get the credit they deserve”. This comment was posted in September 2018 and again demonstrates the level of knowledge about the suffrage campaign on Mumsnet after a year of commemoration of the centenary of the passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

For some, the centenary had led to re-consideration of their own views on the use of violence for political ends. In September 2018 one poster described how she had learned about the suffragettes when she was younger and had thought “Good for them, what heroines, etc, etc.” However, in later life she had found out more about militancy and could not approve of it “which precludes me from idolising the Pankhursts and the WSPU”. She explained that this opinion was usually not a problem, but “now the ‘suffragette flag’ ... is topical and gaining popularity. Hence my conflict: I don’t want to adopt the emblem of bombers and arsonists but I want to show my support for the reasons behind the flag.”

It is interesting that this poster framed her disquiet about the militant methods of the WSPU within the question of whether or not to show her support for women’s rights by “adopting” the colours or the flag of the WSPU. There is quite a lot of discussion on Mumsnet about purchasing various items in “suffragette colours” such as t-shirts, scarfs and mugs, particularly around the 2018 commemorations. One thread in October 2018 was entitled “Suffragette crafting” and discussed the production of handmade bracelets, knitting scarfs in “suffragette colours”, gardening with purple and white bulbs, and making a suffragette Christmas garland. In these actions Mumsnetters were of course following the lead of the suffragettes themselves, from the production of banners and the design work of Sylvia Pankhurst and other artists who belonged to the Artists’ Suffrage League to the smaller-scale embroidery of handkerchiefs and small panels made by individual suffragettes in prison. Denise Jones 2020 argues that such crafting was subversive since the only handicrafts imprisoned suffragettes were supposed to undertake was the plain knitting and sewing imposed on them. Mumsnetters also seemed to enjoy the subversive pleasures of incorporating suffragette colours into Christmas decorations, for example. Others had taken advantage of the plethora of items relating to the suffragettes made available in museum gift shops and on online marketplaces such as Etsy in 2018. One poster, however, asked Mumsnetters not to buy replica WSPU hunger

strike medals: “Please don’t buy the prison medals. They were given for a specific purpose and as you have not been in prison for suffragists [sic] you don’t qualify.” Hilda Kean 2005 notes that the scarcity of suffrage ephemera such as prison medals has led to a high worth being placed on the real items that are available for sale, such as the £19,000 paid for Mary Richardson’s medal in 2003.

As far as the dilemma attached to signalling a support for violence through the use of the suffragette colours was concerned, one poster on that thread suggested

It’s common for particular figures or civil rights groups to undergo Santa Clausification that brushes out actions that later generations might deplore or condemn. I think the colours are now associated with the historical landmark of votes for women rather than WSPU. It’s rather like Canute, the original story has been lost.

Here she echoes Jessica Ghilani 2010, who argues that the nostalgic reclamation of images of women from US First and Second World War posters, particularly Rosie the Riveter, enable “kitsch” to “neutralize previously prominent political capital by transforming militarized visuals into everyday utilitarian goods”.

Mumsnet posters were also able to nuance their discussion of the suffragette leadership, particularly in relation to class or politics. In September 2012 a poster stated “Emmeline Pankhurst is a rubbish hero. She only cared about middle-class wealthy women like herself getting the vote and disowned her daughter for working with the ‘lower classes’ and having a child out of wedlock.” In February 2018 another poster commented that Emmeline Pankhurst “was only really interested in votes for women like herself and was quite establishment” and also noted that “many women suffragists had links with the liberal party or with socialism”.

Discussion of suffragists rather than suffragettes and criticism of the Pankhursts is in direct contrast to the findings of Red Chidgey (2015) when she examined the dominant imagery of the suffrage campaign discussed on the F Word blog. Chidgey found that the most commonly cited actions discussed were of imprisonment, window-smashing and hunger-striking, and suggested that this focus implied that the more constitutional or non-violent aspects of the movement had slipped out of popular memory because of the focus of the media and other commemorative discourse on the more spectacular militant actions of the WSPU. However, the discussion on Mumsnet demonstrates a more nuanced depiction of the suffrage campaign, with clear understanding of the role of the constitutional suffragists and a less hero-worshipping attitude towards Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. There are several reasons why this might be the case. One is that users of Mumsnet are on average older than users of the F-Word, which was founded in 2001 specifically for young feminists—in 2009 a Mumsnet census found the average age of users to be 36 (David Matley 2020). Many posters who discuss the suffrage campaign on Mumsnet state that they would have been suffragists rather than suffragettes, possibly reflecting a more mature appreciation of the value of continued campaigning rather than spectacular actions. Secondly, the raised profile of the suffragist campaign throughout the centenary commemorations has ensured that posters are more aware of the wider history of the suffrage campaign, and in particular the suffragists.

While many posters remembered being taught something about the suffrage campaign at school, there was a clear apprehension of the limited nature of this education and the need for the wider discussion of women’s history in the curriculum: “we only covered

the suffragists and the suffragettes. Everything before was left out” (June 2016). Some thought this was a deliberate policy: “I am not surprised the role of the suffragettes has been squashed by history. Who wants to give credit to uppity women or indeed uppity anyone” (March 2015). Others positioned the suffrage campaigners with other political campaigns and called for children to be taught about “the long, hard fight for democracy—the Chartists, the Peterloo massacre, the way police stormed early meetings of the Labour party because you couldn’t possibly have common people try to play a part in politics could you?” (May 2006).

In order to ensure that their daughters learned more about the suffrage campaign, posters reported giving them books on the subject: “[I am] trying to gently introduce her to the idea that things weren’t always the way they are now in this country for women and girls” (May 2018). Books mentioned included Mary M. Talbot’s *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette*, Sally Nicholls’ *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* and Carol Drinkwater’s *Suffragette (My Story)*. Both Talbot and Nicholls’ books were published to coincide with the 2018 centenary and, while Drinkwater’s book was originally published in 2011, a special centenary edition was produced for 2018. Other posters continued their own education, and again many of these seem to have been stimulated by the centenary in 2018. At the end of that year one poster reported that she was reading Millicent Fawcett’s books on the campaign while another recommended Jenni Murray’s *The History of Britain in 21 Women*, “several chapters of which were about suffragettes and suffragists” (April 2018). Diane Atkinson’s *Rise Up Women!* (again published to coincide with the centenary in 2018) was also a popular recommendation.

During the centenary celebrations in 2018 it was suggested by some politicians and others that those suffragettes who had been imprisoned for their militant actions might be pardoned. Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn pledged to issue an official apology and posthumous pardons at a special meeting of the shadow cabinet at the Museum of London, which hosted an exhibition about the suffrage campaign. Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson and the Fawcett Society also called for the anniversary to be marked by a pardon. However, others, such as the feminist campaigner Caroline Criado Perez, argued against such a move. Criado Perez argued “Pardoning them now . . . does them a disservice” (New Statesman 2018). Mumsnet posters were more likely to agree with her:

They intended to break the law. Many other suffrage campaigners didn’t. And if we are pardoning the suffragettes, are we going to go back through history and pardon all the men prosecuted campaigning for equal franchise too? (February 2018)

The suffragettes wanted to be arrested! No point taking away something they wanted! (February 2018)

Use your vote!

Mention of the suffragettes came particularly to the fore in discussions on Mumsnet during general election campaigns. The image of the suffering suffragette enduring force feeding so that modern women could vote was repeated again and again, especially in response to those who were proposing not to vote. Several posters referenced their mothers’ influence here: “I was brought up by a mother who banged on about the suffragettes and the woman’s NEED to vote, not a choice in her eyes” (April 2017). The

implication was that women *had* to use their vote because of the sacrifice of the suffragettes. Red Chidgey (2015) calls this the “historical duty narrative” and notes the way in which the suffragettes’ militant actions have been “folded into the nation’s mythologized story of its democratic past”. Laura E. N. Mayhall (1995) describes this focus on imprisonment and force-feeding as the “suffragette spirit”, which has come to dominate subsequent discussion of the movement. On the subject of voting, the constitutional campaigning of the suffragists took a back seat to the militants in Mumsnet discussions. In particular, the actions of Emily Wilding Davison, who died after invading the Epsom Derby racetrack in 1913, were often referenced by posters discussing the requirement on women to vote, although there were mixed results as far as the spelling of her name was concerned: “in honour and respect of the Suffragettes and in particular Emily Davidson [sic] who lost her life in the campaign” (June 2016). Katharine Cockin (2004) notes how this action, “the woman who threw herself under the horse”, haunts popular culture, from *Mary Poppins* to Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Falling Angels*, and argues that, in this way, the militancy of the suffragettes is constructed as spontaneous individual actions rather than a coordinated and organised campaign.

However, the suffragettes were also used to criticise the *character* of a woman’s vote. There was an implication from some Mumsnet posters that, because of the sacrifices the suffragettes had made, a woman’s vote needed to be a considered, passionate and honest one. In other words, it needed to be better than a man’s vote. Thus one poster criticised others’ plans to vote tactically in April 2017, announcing “Tactical voting—so childish. Is this what the suffragettes campaigned for so that women could vote?” One poster she criticised pushed back, stating that her one aim was to keep the Conservative party out of power and therefore “I will vote positively, using my brain, intelligence and the rights that the suffragettes gave me to keep these people out.”

Those who voted tactically, however, were not the main targets of posters who conceived of the woman’s vote as a sacred duty. Their particular ire was reserved for posters who confessed that they would not be voting at all, either because they could not be bothered or were not interested or because they felt there was no politician that they could support. “Suffragettes went on hunger strike to win the vote for women. Wasting this precious right is shameful” (May 2010). “All women should vote, when you think how the suffragettes suffered to get us the vote” (May 2009).

However, several of the posters who were considering not voting argued that “the suffragettes made it possible for women to choose to vote if they want to” (June 2016) and “Just saying that they fought for the right to choose to vote, not be forced to” (June 2017). Red Chidgey (2015) also found this redefinition of the suffrage legacy as meaning the choice to engage or not amongst some of her younger feminists. In response to this argument, one Mumsnet poster snapped:

Do feel free to pinpoint that expression in suffragist literature. I don’t think you’ll find it. Perhaps because it was difficult to believe that in exactly 104 years things would move from Emily Davison dying at the Derby for Votes for Women to “Not only can I not be bothered to vote, but I expect other women to approve, because, after all, isn’t feminism about choice?” (June 2017).

“Choice feminism” has been identified as a popular form of contemporary feminism that frames all choices that women make as justified and politically acceptable, even if these choices might be individualistic and driven by consumerism rather than working together

for the common good (Rachel Thwaites 2017). It is interesting to see an attack on this concept of “choice feminism” on a site that has been identified by some as supporting neoliberalism and a consumerist approach to motherhood.

Other posters tried to nuance the argument about women’s duty to vote by recommending “a militant abstention”. In May 2010 one poster suggested spoiling the ballot paper, “which records that you turned up but didn’t want to vote for anyone. The suffragettes may have approved of that”.

The Mumsnetter as modern suffragette

As already noted, one place where frequent mentions of the suffrage campaign can be found on Mumsnet is in threads concerned with the proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) by the UK and Scottish governments. The much-criticised users of the feminism talk board on Mumsnet made frequent reference to the suffragettes in descriptions of their own situation. “I take strength from the suffragettes right now” wrote one poster in March 2019, who was worried that her gender-critical views might lead to dismissal from her place of work. Another poster in February 2020 urged others, “Whatever the outcome we keep going. The suffragettes originally were pushed back. Put in prison. Force fed. Be strong.” One poster stated her gender-critical beliefs and then said “Women like me haven’t been so unpopular since the days of the suffragists” (February 2018). Those on the talk boards who were critical of the gender-critical discussion also made the connection between those posters and the suffragettes. In September 2018 one poster remarked “They seem to think they are aligned with suffragettes and are behaving as though the banned posters are some sort of MN [Mumsnet] martyrs.”

Red Chidgey (2015) suggests that the feminist memories of the suffragettes are performatively invoked by contemporary groups to help shape political agendas and actions. She explores the way in which climate-change activists Climate Rush presented themselves as a woman-led protest inspired by the actions of the suffragettes, for example dressing up as suffragettes in order to lead public protests, despite the fact that Climate Rush explicitly embraced peaceful civil disobedience, unlike the WSPU. Similarly, Krista Cowman’s (2010) analysis of the discussion of first-wave feminism in the second-wave publication *Spare Rib* demonstrates how *Spare Rib* writers positioned contemporary campaigns for women’s rights in a linear relationship to suffrage and encouraged readers to assess the effectiveness of militant methods.

As the introduction to this article describes, links to the direct action of the suffragettes are increasingly being made by gender-critical feminists both on and offline. In September 2018, the radical feminist and gay rights activist Linda Bellos wore a pocket handkerchief in the WSPU colours of purple, white and green to a pre-trial hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court. Bellos was facing a private prosecution under Section 5 of the Public Order Act, which prohibits “threatening or abusive words or behaviour”, relating to a speech she had given in York about the Gender Recognition Act. The prosecution had been taken out by a trans woman, Guiliana Kendal, who had watched the live stream of the talk from her home and brought the case privately after the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to bring charges. (In November 2018 the CPS took over the case and discontinued it.) Venice Allen, who had live-streamed the event,

was charged in the same private prosecution with sending an offensive message by means of a public electronic communications network. Bellos had been involved in the instigation of Black History Month in the UK, so it is perhaps not surprising that she would make the connection between her court case and those of historical feminists such as the suffragettes. However, at the start of proceedings at the court, Kendal asked the judge to make a ruling on the handkerchief and also a t-shirt worn by a person in the public gallery which stated “Woman: Adult Human Female”. The judge replied that he was not prepared to make a ruling on these items, although some supporters of Bellos had been asked to remove their suffragette sashes before being allowed into court. A supporter of Kendal later told *Pink News* (2018) that she felt that the suffragette movement was being appropriated to exclude trans women. The Bellos case was followed with great interest on Mumsnet, with several Mumsnetters attending the demonstrations that took place outside the court in both September and November 2018. One of these reported that she had been unable to wear her suffragette sash in court.

Another case carefully followed on Mumsnet was that of Marion Millar, the Scottish campaigner who appeared at Glasgow Sherriff Court in August 2021 charged with sending homophobic and transphobic tweets, including a picture of suffragette ribbons in white, purple and green. The case was much covered in the media, particularly because the Scottish National Party MP Joanna Cherry QC represented Millar in court and because a large group of her supporters, many dressed as suffragettes or bearing banners and sashes in the WSPU colours gathered outside the court to support Millar. It is clear that several of these supporters used Mumsnet as a place to organise, with a number of threads discussing meeting up outside the court. All of these threads made references to the purchase of “suffragette ribbons” with recommendations of various online shops: “I ordered a load of ribbons the day I read that Marion Millar had been charged” (June 2021). However, there were also comments suggesting concerns that, in the light of the Millar trial, the wearing of suffragette colours might be seen as breaking new Scottish laws on hate crime: “I actually called my mum the other day and told her to take down my suffragette ribbons I’d left in the window of my room from when I lived there, lest she get arrested.”

Mumsnet gender-critical feminists also made connections between the divide between the suffragists and the suffragettes and the criticism gender-critical feminists faced from other women. “I think those meek (well in their relations to men) women who say ‘Yes, yes, voting rights are nice, but feminism is too radical’ never really stopped to think about how the suffragettes fought for voting rights, and how asking nicely never helped any” (July 2016).

Others, however, argued the need for both words *and* deeds: “It’s like the suffragists, who kept to political discourse and suffragettes, who took direct action. You need both for change I think” (February 2019). “Remember in votes for women there were suffragists as well as suffragettes. Both played their part” (January 2020). One poster identified herself as currently a suffragist in the controversy over the GRA: “I am currently working along a more suffragist line but my God, I will take it further if needs be. If they manage to remove the actual meaning of what it is to be a woman or girl, how much of a jump would it be to totally remove our voices?” (September 2018).

Posters also suggested similarities between anti-suffrage campaigners and women who campaigned to close down the voices of gender-critical women: “It’s also interesting that some of the most strenuous opponents of this very necessary endeavour have been other women (cf. the anti-suffragist Mrs Humphrey Ward)” (April 2019).

Concerns about the number of different political parties that incorporated the concept of gender self-identification and reform of the GRA in their manifestos also led to a number of Mumsnetters professing themselves to be politically homeless. This was a particular issue during the general elections of 2017 and 2019, with a number of posters admitting that, for the first time, they would be unable to vote at all: “I’m spoiling and writing why I can’t vote for any of them. Suffragettes won my right to vote, not a compulsion to accept any party that shits on women’s rights” (October 2018). In this way, gender-critical feminists on Mumsnet framed not voting as both the radical choice and one that would have been condoned by the suffragettes.

Conclusions

Previous researchers have suggested that the image of the historical campaign for votes for women is continually reinvigorated and reinvested with meaning by later feminists. An investigation into the ways in which the campaign is framed on the women’s discussion forum Mumsnet demonstrates clearly how women in the 21st century use their feminist foremothers to support their own political purposes.

The discussion of the suffrage campaign on Mumsnet demonstrates a good amount of knowledge about the campaign, including distinctions between the suffragists and suffragettes. Unlike previous research into the “everyday” discussion of votes for women, which found that the suffragettes had overwhelmed the suffragists in general awareness of the suffrage campaign, Mumsnetters understood the contribution of both militant and constitutional campaigners to the eventual achievement of votes for women. There was also some nuanced discussion of the value of militancy and the role of the Pankhursts. This is particularly true in the discussions during and after the 2018 centenary celebrations of (some) women achieving the vote, and demonstrates the value of these celebrations in widening general knowledge about the suffrage campaign. Mumsnetters were also stimulated by the campaign to read more around the subject and to encourage their daughters with age-appropriate books, of which a plethora were helpfully published during the centenary.

Nonetheless, when the discussion turns to the necessity for women to vote—what Chidgey calls the “historical duty narrative”—the dominance of the image of the suffering suffragette becomes clear. Mumsnetters are told that it is their duty to vote because of the martyrdom of the suffragettes—the suffragists disappear from view at this point and the emphasis is on the suffering of the suffragettes in prison rather than any wider campaigning. In particular, the sacrifice of Emily Wilding Davison is invoked. However, the suffragettes can also be used as justification for women *not* using their vote, as long as this is framed as part of political protest rather than as laziness or lack of enthusiasm. As long as the choice of not voting is framed as a thoughtful decision, made out of anger at the political choices available, it is presented as an acceptable demonstration of political protest—and therefore “what the suffragettes would have wanted”.

Mumsnet is notorious/famous for allowing gender-critical discussion around the proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 in comparison to other areas of the Internet where such discussion has often been closed down. Gender-critical feminists, both on and off Mumsnet, make frequent references to the suffragettes and suffragists in their descriptions of their own situation. They emphasise their connections to the militancy of the suffragettes and the way in which other groups, such as the suffragists, disowned them. In this way they are able to performatively invoke their heritage as militant, radical feminists, and imbue their cause with a legitimacy and heroism some contemporary feminists and the media would refuse them. By positioning themselves as the suffragettes, they are able to position their detractors as anti-suffragists (on the wrong side of history) but also to suggest the potential for connections with less radical but equally concerned women, who are described as suffragists. Katharine Cockin (2004) suggests that, in the past, the militancy of the suffragettes has been constructed as spontaneous individual actions, rather than a coordinated and organised campaign. The use of the figure of the suffragette by modern gender-critical feminists, however, and in particular the use of WSPU colours, allows them to identify themselves to each other on social media and to present a united front at real-life demonstrations.

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