

Believers in biology: a coordinated effort to disrupt the 2022 census.

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‘Believers in Biology’: a coordinated effort to disrupt the 2022 census

Abstract

This article investigates the attempt by some gender-critical Scots, led by organisations such as For Women Scotland, to disrupt the administration of the 2022 census in Scotland. They used their census returns to register a protest around guidance relating to the Sex question and around the wider issue of the Scottish Government’s plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act. Protestors used social media to share images of their protest on the census forms over the whole census period, meaning that potential protesters were more likely to choose to protest because they saw a growing number of others sharing what they had done. It is suggested that this protest has contributed, and will continue to contribute, to costs relating to the administration of the census and the processing of census data, including the production and administration of paper census forms; the extension of the deadline for completion of the census; and the ability to use machines to read and process the data. Their action was linked by many protesters to the actions of the suffragettes in relation to the 1911 census, with the expectation that their protests would be visible in 100 years’ time. However, data-protection policies mean many of their actions will not be recorded.

Keywords: Census; Suffragettes; Gender-Critical; Protest; Sex; Gender

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Introduction

The decennial census took place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in March 2021. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government chose to postpone the census in Scotland until March 2022. The 2021 English and Welsh census achieved a return rate of 97%, but Scotland's final national return rate was only 89%, with 2.3 million Scottish households submitting returns. To encourage a better rate of return, the Scottish Government extended the original deadline of 1 May 2022 by a month, which Constitution Secretary Angus Robertson suggested cost Scottish taxpayers about £6 million (*The National*, 2022b). A further informal extension was given until 12 June, with the census website, administered by the National Records of Scotland (NRS), promising that late completions up to that date would not be fined (*The National*, 1 June 2022a). The final figure of an 89% return rate was reported to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament by the Registrar General and Chief Executive of the National Records of Scotland, Paul Lowe, on 23 June 2022 (CEEAC, 2022). Lowe acknowledged that lessons needed to be learned in relation to the number of people who did not participate in the census and suggested that people had simply been too busy to complete the form. However, commenting on BBC Radio Scotland's flagship *Good Morning Scotland* programme, Professor Lindsay Paterson of Edinburgh University suggested that decoupling the Scottish census from the rest of the UK had reduced awareness of the exercise, and also noted that various controversies over questions on gender [sic] and national identity may also have contributed to the lower return rate (BBC News, 2022).

The reference to controversies around the question of sex/gender relates to a number of issues. In relation to the 2022 Scottish census, there were tensions over the decision to allow self-identification in the guidance for answering the Sex question in the census. More widely, there were tensions around the Scottish Government's proposed legislation to reform the 2004 Gender Recognition Act in line with the principles of self-declaration, removing any need for the presentation of medical diagnoses of gender dysphoria, and lowering the age of application for a Gender Recognition Certificate to 16. A number of women's groups have been established in both Scotland and the wider UK to raise the question of how women's rights might be impacted by such changes. These include Woman's Place UK, Fair Play for Women, Frontline Feminists Scotland and For Women

Scotland. There are also unofficial groups within political parties, such as Labour Women's Declaration, Conservatives for Women, Liberal Voice for Women and SNP Women's Pledge. Such women are frequently described as being 'gender critical', although not all accept this term.

The 2021/2 censuses were the first British censuses where the majority of the data was gathered online. However, Lowe reported to the CEEAC Committee the surprising fact that 363,000 paper forms had been proactively requested over the census period (CEEAC, 2022). The demand for paper copies appears to have taken the National Records of Scotland by surprise, with newspapers reporting long wait times for a paper copy to be sent out due to an unexpectedly high volume of requests (*Scottish Daily Express*, 2022). This article investigates one group of Scots who were encouraged by campaigners to request a paper copy, with the intention of registering a protest relating to guidance given around the question on sex. While Lindsay Paterson suggested that concerns around this question might have led to people not engaging with the census, it is argued instead that there was an attempt by some gender-critical Scots, led by organisations such as For Women Scotland, to use their census returns to register a protest around this question and around the wider issue of the Scottish Government's plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act. They did not boycott the census but instead worked to disrupt its administration.

In their call for action, this census disruption was related by the campaigners themselves to the actions of the suffragettes during the 1911 census, particularly those women who chose to register a protest about their lack of enfranchisement in their written returns (For Women Scotland, 2022). Historians have noted that official accounts of the administration of the 1911 census did not mention this action by the suffragettes, and it was only when the census returns were released to the public in 2009 that it became clear how many women used the opportunity to send a message to the government (Liddington and Crawford 2011). A similar opportunity, however, will not be possible in one hundred years' time since the paper forms are to be destroyed in line with data-protection policies after the information is taken from them. Thus any additions or amendments to either the paper census form or its envelope made by gender-critical Scots will not be obvious for next century's historians.

This project therefore set out to investigate the motivations of those who used paper copies of the census form to make a protest and how they registered their protest. It also aimed to preserve for posterity at least some record of this protest in light of the lack of an official archive. Its findings suggest that this protest has contributed, and will continue to contribute, to costs relating to the administration of the census and the processing of census data, including the production and administration of paper census forms; the extension of the deadline for completion of the census; and the ability to use machines to read and process the data.

Background

In late February 2022, the gender-critical campaign group Fair Play for Women lost its appeal at the Court of Session against Scottish census guidance that stated that the answer given to the question 'What is your sex?' could be different to the sex given on a birth certificate and that a Gender Recognition Certificate was not needed. Fair Play for Women had claimed that this was in breach of existing legal definitions of sex and gender and that the data collected would thus be a mix of sex and 'gender identity' (Fair Play for Women, 2022). A similar case, again brought by Fair Play for Women, concerning the 2021 census for England and Wales had resulted in the guidance being changed, with people advised to answer the question about their sex using information from their birth certificates or Gender Recognition Certificates. Guidance relating to census questions regarding sex therefore differed between the Scottish census and the earlier English and Welsh census, with the Scottish guidance stating that an answer to the Sex question 'can be different from what is on your birth certificate' (Scotland's Census, 2022a).

In response to the Court of Session ruling, organisations such as For Women Scotland encouraged gender-critical Scots to find lawful ways to register a protest. They stated:

Completing a paper copy, rather than completing it online, will not only cause the authorities inconvenience but also means that a historical record is preserved. Just as we can see the Suffragettes' protest messages on the 1911 census, in a hundred

years our granddaughters or great-granddaughters will be able to see that we also stood up.

(For Women Scotland, 2022).

Unlike the suffragette campaign in 1911, which suggested a total boycott of the census, gender-critical Scots were thus encouraged to ask for a paper copy of the census to fill out by their own hand rather than online, and to use their responses to register a protest and disrupt the administration of the census. Using Liddington and Crawford's (2011) terminology from their own analysis of the 1911 census returns, these protestors were therefore 'resisters', refusing to supply information on the census form or registering a protest on the form, rather than 'evaders'. For Women Scotland recommended that protestors answered the voluntary census question 'What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?' with 'Believer in biology'. They also suggested other ways of using the paper form and envelope to disrupt the smooth administration of the census and make gender-critical opinions clear, including creative uses of ribbon and glitter in the suffragette colours of green, white and purple, and folding the form multiple times to make it difficult to be machine-read. While there is no evidence of an in-depth knowledge of the tactics of the 1911 suffragettes amongst the organisers of the protest, it is interesting to note how closely their advice conformed to some of their predecessors' actions – for example, in 1911 the census form of Dublin sisters Helen and Louisa Lawler recorded their religion as 'Suffragette' although the official enumerator crossed this out and replaced it with the words 'R. Catholic' (Murphy, 2015: 37).

The 1911 census had been the first census where returns were completed by the head of a British household in their own hand rather than by official census enumerators. Suffragettes were encouraged to evade or disrupt the census to send a message to the Liberal Government of the day that, if women did not count, neither should they be counted (Liddington and Crawford, 2011). Either complete evasion or the registering of a protest in the way the form was filled in offered the opportunity for 'throwing metaphorical spanners into official machinery' (Murphy 2015: 27). Cliona Murphy (1989) argues that the very act of census evasion was of profound psychological and symbolic importance to the women involved.

The 1911 census returns have proved to be valuable sources of information about suffragette activity and sympathies for a number of women's history scholars since the release of the returns in 2009 (Liddington, 2014; Waters, 2018; White, 2010), and the call by For Women Scotland envisaged similar uses of the 2022 census in 100 years' time. The use of the 1911 census forms as primary evidence was seen to be particularly important in archiving the responses of individual women, given the fact that official reports of the 1911 census made no mention of the boycott but instead emphasised the smooth running of the state's administrative machinery, which until the release of the returns in 2009 had influenced demographic historians to mostly ignore the suffragette boycott (Liddington and Crawford, 2011: 103).

However, while For Women Scotland stressed the importance of preserving a historical record via paper copies of census returns, Scotland's Census has stated that the answers will be processed and then the paper copies deleted:

[T]he paper questionnaires will be destroyed in line with government security guidelines i.e. data will be shredded on-site by the supplier whilst all digital images that are taken of the paper questionnaires will be deleted off all of the supplier IT infrastructure and back up facilities.

(Scotland's Census, 2022).

This means that – unlike the suffragette protests of 1911 – there will be limited records of this particular protest by gender-critical Scots, and no record at all of any additions to the paper census form or envelope in terms of illustrations, comments or glitter.

For Women Scotland positioned their protest firmly within the history of feminist protest, particularly the suffragettes' boycott of the 1911 census. This is not surprising given the connections gender-critical feminists in the UK make between themselves and the suffragettes. Gender-critical feminists in the UK performatively invoke their suffragette heritage as militant, radical feminists both on and offline (Pedersen, 2022a; Vitalosova, 2020), thus imbuing their cause with legitimacy and history. Online, the use of suffragette

pen names and WSPU colours allow gender-critical posters on sites such as Twitter and Mumsnet to identify each other. In Scotland, a court case against the gender-critical campaigner Marion Millar in August 2021 focused on her sending of allegedly transphobic tweets, including a photograph of suffragette ribbons, while a demonstration against the Government's proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act outside the Scottish Parliament in September 2021 saw many demonstrators wearing suffragette colours of green, white and purple or waving banners in the same colours (*Daily Record*, 2021). The association made by For Women Scotland between the suffragettes and a modern census protest would have thus been familiar to many of those who were critical of the Scottish Government's plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act and to introduce gender self-identification both in the achievement of a Gender Recognition Certificate and in the guidance for answering the Sex question in the 2022 census.

Methodology

A short questionnaire was produced using Google Forms. A limited number of demographic questions were included to ensure anonymity of respondents and therefore encourage completion of a survey on what has proved to be a controversial topic. Respondents were only asked to give their age and sex. Five other questions investigated how respondents had made their gender-critical views known in their census return, what had prompted this action, and whether they had spoken to others about their actions. The project received approval from a university ethics committee and all data from the survey is stored via web-based university file storage that is consistently and regularly backed up and lies behind an institutional firewall.

The survey was launched on 1 June 2022, at the end of the official extension of the census period, via Twitter and also through direct contact with a number of gender-critical organisations in Scotland such as For Women Scotland, Frontline Feminists Scotland, Forth Valley Feminists and Edinburgh Feminists. Survey respondents were therefore accessed via organisational gatekeepers such as For Women Scotland or saw the survey promoted on social media. By 1 August 2022 it had garnered 654 responses. In addition, the original Twitter post also received responses that included photographs of the official envelopes for the census forms covered in stickers and suffragette colours, intricately folded census forms

and close-ups of the Religion question in the form where respondents stated that they were a 'believer in biology'. It should be noted that what is reported on in this article is not a representative survey of Scottish feminists, or Gender-critical feminists in Scotland, or even of those who protested the census in this way. It does, however, offer an interesting and illuminating snapshot of the methods and motivations of some of those who participated in this action.

Results

555 survey respondents stated that they were female with an additional 99 male respondents. Given that the survey was specifically targeted via feminist groups, the number of men who identified as gender critical and had undertaken some sort of protest activity while completing the census form is notable. It is also clear that several of the respondents had completed their form as a joint effort with their partner. One male respondent explained that he had given as his Religion: "'Belief in biology" for both myself and my wife (with her agreement)'. A greater recognition that the gender-critical community in Scotland includes a good number of men may be required.

The age breakdown of respondents is given in Table 1.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Almost all respondents (87%) were aged over 45, with no respondent aged 18-24 and only 16 respondents aged 25-34. This reflects previous research into the demographic makeup of those gender-critical feminists in Scotland who are willing to publicly identify themselves as such (Pedersen, 2022b). Given the well-documented threats to their well-being and job security made against many of the higher-profile women involved in the debate in Scotland, such as J. K. Rowling and Joanna Cherry KC MP, it is perhaps not surprising that it is older adults, some of whom may be retired, who felt able to identify themselves as actively gender critical in a government census. A nervousness about what might happen to a respondent stating gender-critical views was reflected in the one survey respondent who stated that she had not undertaken any protest action since she was 'too scared to do anything'.

The finding might also reflect a generational difference in Scotland. In February 2022, a poll conducted by Savanta ComRes for the BBC found that younger Scots were more supportive of the Scottish Government's plans to make applying for a Gender Recognition Certificate easier (*Holyrood*, 2022). It should also be acknowledged that it was more likely to be older adults who completed the census form on the behalf of their household, making it easier for them to express any gender-critical views. The 1911 suffragettes faced a similar situation. Analysing Irish census returns in 1911, Murphy (2015) notes that no suffragist protestor resided in a household where her father was the head of the family – these women were not allowed to use the census form to register a protest. Nonetheless there was evidence of some younger gender-critical respondents to the Scottish 2022 census. One survey respondent explained how she had 'stated "Believer in Biology" as my religion, and, with her agreement, also for my daughter's answer to the same question (aged 10 at date of survey)'. Another male respondent had requested paper copies of the census form for himself, his wife and their three teenage children and reported that they had all written 'Believer in Biology' in the Religion question.

'Believer in biology'

Asked what respondents had done to demonstrate their gender-critical views, by far the most frequent response was the completion of the Religion question with the words 'Believer in Biology'. At least 355 survey respondents stated that they had entered these words or variants thereof in their response to the question about faith. As one noted, 'I am an atheist, but I completed the faith Q[uestion] with "believer in biology"'. Others stated their religion as a belief in science, in biological reality, or a gender-critical belief. The frequency of this particular protest statement demonstrates how far For Women Scotland's directive had penetrated. Their references to the suffragettes had also been influential. One respondent added the 'names of historical Scottish suffragettes written on sections that weren't relevant to me'. Another commented 'I was aware the suffragettes had made a protest on the census. I felt women in 2022 needed to do the same'. Several had decorated blank areas of the form with suffragette flags. In addition, envelopes were decorated with suffragette stickers, wrapped in ribbons, tape or braided wool in purple, green and white, or filled with glitter in the same colours. Several

respondents had filled in the form using purple or green ink. Echoing For Women Scotland's call to make a mark for posterity, one respondent noted that she planned to 'keep a copy of the completed form in my family history files to retain and bequeath. Hopefully my female descendants will know I tried to do something!'

Making the form impossible to read by machine was a frequent ploy in respondents' determination to make the administration of the census difficult. Respondents reported writing upside down. Some folded the form in different ways to make it difficult to smooth out to be read. One described how she had over-marked each tick box with a very large tick so that it could not be read by a machine. Another had written in a mixture of very large and very small lettering, some in capitals, some longhand and some upside down. One respondent gave a detailed description of her attempts to make it as difficult as possible to use her return:

[F]eminist stickers attached to the form and on the envelope; coffee stains on form; dog eared every corner and concertina folded to make form harder to scan (if they were to be scanned- I didn't know!); envelope filled with cardboard and blank paper to add weight and possibly thereby increasing cost of postage; loose stickers, postcards, and ribbons in suffragette colours enclosed with form; envelope sealed and opened several times and finally sealed with sellotape to make opening harder if done by machine; envelope windows obscured by contents so code could not be seen.

Another respondent stated that she had telephoned the helpline at the National Records of Scotland several times 'complaining about the questions asked and asking them to explain gender ideology to me and why it was on the census'. Her aim was to ensure that her complaints were passed back to supervisors. She also 'requested multiple paper copies and returned them all to them with blank forms inside'.

For a good number of respondents, the phrase 'Believer in Biology' was the only protest they had made on the form. However, others used other questions to make gender-critical statements. A number of respondents refused to answer the sex/gender questions, others claimed that their gender was 'cat gender', 'transatlantic airliner', or 'xenogender'. Three respondents stated their occupation as 'Opposing ScotGov erasure

of women', 'defending women's rights' and 'fighting gender ideology'. One of these also drew Venus symbols in the margins of the form and stated that her mode of travel to work was a broomstick – three other respondents gave a similar answer to the transport question while another drew pictures of witches in the margins of the form. These answers draw on wider attacks on gender-critical women as 'witches', 'Karens', and 'on the wrong side of history' (Dillon, 2022), but also suggest that the social-media posts of those who had already filled in their form were influential in suggesting different ways of registering a protest to those who were delaying.

Delaying completion of the census was a further tactic used to disrupt the census – and of course this impacted on the cost of the census. Several respondents stated that they had delayed returning the census in order to make as much trouble as possible. One noted that, when she finally posted the form, she made sure that the envelope window obscured the bar code, commenting 'Doing anything possible to inconvenience this travesty of a census'. While For Women Scotland encouraged the completion of the census, noting the necessity of good census data for policy and legislative decision-making, a number of respondents stated that they had completely boycotted the census. One explained 'I wrote to them stating I refused to complete the form as the data would skew what it is meant to provide. I stated I am a woman, have no gender and I listed the many reasons I am against self ID'. Another stated that she had ordered a paper copy of the form, but on reading the questions had refused to complete it. In his evidence to the CEEAC Committee, Paul Lowe stated that he had been 'highly surprised' by the fact that one-third of those who proactively requested a paper copy of the census then failed to return it (CEEAC, 2022). These respondents offer some insights into why this might have occurred.

Motivations behind the protest

The answers to the question asking respondents about motivations for their actions demonstrate the depth of feeling behind the protest. While the majority of the respondents acknowledged the role of For Women Scotland or more widely gender-critical social media in encouraging them to register a protest during the census, many

respondents took the opportunity of an open text box to share their thoughts on wider issues relating to the Scottish Government's planned reform of the Gender Recognition Act. Some of the shorter answers demonstrated the depth of emotion respondents felt – 'fury'; 'sheer rage'; 'frustration'; 'outraged'; 'livid'; 'sickened by the Scottish Government'. Others stated a need to 'tell the truth'; 'because it is true'; 'because sex matters'. Other frequently repeated responses included words such as 'erosion of women's rights'; 'erasure of women's rights'; 'SNP removing women's rights'.

Some responses made reference specifically to the need for accurate data to be collected via the census and respondents' concern that confusion between sex and gender identity would lead to inaccurate data – 'because accurate data matters'; 'not keeping accurate DATA about sex means we cannot measure sex discrimination'; 'I work with data so I know it is essential to record accurately'; 'I'm concerned we are not accurately gathering data on women in Scotland. This affects service provision for women'. One respondent noted that 'The irony of this (from their perspective) is that lack of accurate information means that they also won't have proper information about trans-identified individuals, so they won't be able to tell whether / to what extent they are different from their peers'.

Many more widened the discussion to share their own histories, why they took a gender-critical point of view, and their thoughts on the proposed reform of the GRA:

Oh so many things!!! The disparity between the way the census was run in Scotland and the rest of UK, the recent hate crime bill and its ignoring of misogyny, the current [Gender Recognition Act] changes going through the Scottish Parliament, the way policing is apparently being influenced by an influential political group, the fact that my grandmother was a suffragist and I was brought up in the faith.

As seen in the quote above, several respondents made links between their own actions and those of the suffragettes, making links to previous family members: 'Grandmother was tailoress in Glasgow, supported suffragettes'; 'I already knew about what Suffragettes/ists had written on their forms & wanted to be part of history'. Others specifically identified themselves as feminists: 'I am a feminist and wish to retain the rights women have under the Equality Act'; 'I am a feminist and object to the way women

are being expected to give up their hard-earned rights'. Several respondents took up For Women Scotland's appeal to posterity: 'I wanted my grandchildren to see I defended women at a time when our rights are being stripped almost daily'; 'to ensure this woman's opinion was noted for posterity'.

Some noted that they did not entirely agree with the specific tactics suggested by For Women Scotland (several objected to the inclusion of glitter in envelopes), but had decided that a united front was the best way to make their concerns heard by the Government:

I am very angry at how this issue is being progressed by the Scottish Government and wanted to be part of a concerted 'umbrella' protest message being sent to the SG, and thought this option suggested by For Women Scotland (FWS) might do that.

The Census is one of very few ways for ordinary women like myself to make any kind of political protest.

Having considered how best to protest, I decided going for a collective response, as suggested by For Women Scotland, would be the best way to do so.

Others noted that the private nature of the protest appealed to them:

[M]ost people only feel safe protesting in private such as this act as they are scared of the repercussions (in their personal and work lives) of protesting publicly.

Many of the respondents widened discussion of their motivations for protesting to include their opposition to the Scottish Government's proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act, particularly the introduction of self-identification rather than the requirement for medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria. There were frequent references to concerns about the safeguarding of children: 'I worry that we are medicalising children, mainly girls, sterilising them with puberty blockers/ hormones before investigating their psychological problems'; 'I am also very concerned by the explosion in gender dysphoria children and the social affirmation of this extremely complex condition'.

Other specific comments were directed at the Scottish Government or the SNP:

Scottish Government has lost their mind over gender nonsense and has made a joke out of the census at a cost of 148 million and a generation of data corrupted.

[T]he misogynistic attitude displayed by the Scottish Government and its reaction to women's concerns over self-ID.

Scottish Government's deliberate obfuscation of sex and gender without clearly defining the latter, which I consider to the detriment of the female sex.

Did you tell anyone you did this?

The vast majority (562, or 86%) of respondents had shared information about their protest with others. Most of these had told their husband/wife/partner – presumably because many of these filled in the same form for their household. Others had broadcast their actions much more widely on Twitter and other social media, including posting pictures of decorated envelopes or their response to the Faith question. One respondent stated 'Oh yes. I run a couple of Twitter accounts that encouraged others to undertake some form of activism relating to the Census'. Almost all respondents (93%) were aware that others were involved in the protest, with most learning about it from social media, although many respondents also shared knowledge of their actions by word of mouth with friends, colleagues and family.

Several respondents commented that they had shared their decision to delay submission of the form with the official who had called at their home to encourage them to complete the census on time. One respondent added 'Census rep confirmed this has been a very frequent response at doorstep as reason to delaying returning census', although it should be noted that Paul Lowe's evidence to the CEEAC Committee made no mention of this, reporting only that many people told officials on the doorstep that they were too busy to complete and return the form.

Because of the long period available for census returns, the sharing of such protest activities, either on social media or by word of mouth, may have influenced the actions of other gender-critical Scots, either in deciding to make a protest or what form that protest

took. One respondent commented 'Yes, and each person I told then also requested a paper copy'. Again, similarities can be identified between the use of social media by protestors in 2022 and the actions of the suffragettes in 1911, who made good use of letters to the editor columns of local newspapers and articles in suffrage publications to share information about their plans and to encourage others to do the same. Unlike the suffragettes, however, in 2022 protestors were able to use social media to share images of their protest on the census forms over a much longer time – the 1911 census took place over one night. This meant that potential protesters were more likely to choose to protest because they saw a growing number of others sharing what they had done.

Many respondents, however, were much more careful about with whom they shared their actions, referring to 'trusted' friends or those who they knew shared the same views. Many had shared information with feminist groups, either on or offline. For example, the respondent who stated 'Yes, I am in an online, private feminist group and we discussed what we were going to do prior to completing it'. The influence of For Women Scotland was very clear here. Many respondents mentioned their recommendations or having found out about the action from their newsletter. One commented 'I responded as per For Women Scotland's recommendation and was pleased to be part of a smart, well-thought-out broader response'. The co-ordination of the protest comes out clearly here. Women worked together to share information and encouragement with others known to them for their gender-critical views or via social media where they might post anonymously.

Relatively few respondents (84, or 13%) had not told anyone of their protest. Of these, several explained that they felt too 'nervous' or 'fearful' to tell anyone, particularly anyone outside immediate family. One noted she did not 'feel able to be open about it professionally for fear of repercussions'. Another stated 'I work in the civil service, in the area of equalities, so being openly gender critical could negatively impact on my career'. Previous research on Scottish gender-critical women has evidenced women's jobs, friendships, professional opportunities and safety in their own homes threatened because of their opinions on the subject of GRA reform (Pedersen, 2022b). One respondent commented 'I could only speak directly with people I know and trust to not report me to the police for having heretical views'.

Conclusions

Civic Scotland will be discussing the administration of the 2022 census for some years to come. Was the Scottish Government right to decide to delay the census by a year, diverging from the rest of the UK? How did this impact the rate of return? Why did so many people not engage with the process? How much did the extensions of the deadline for completion of the form add to the cost of the census? There have also been suggestions that controversies over the questions relating to sex and national identity may have impacted on engagement with the census, even leading to boycotts.

This project studied a group of Scots who, for the most part, did not boycott the census. However, they were determined to use it as an opportunity for a co-ordinated protest against the Scottish Government's decision to allow self-identification in answers to the Sex question and also to wider issues relating to its proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act. This was a co-ordinated protest, led by For Women Scotland, with participants encouraged to complete the census, but in ways that would hinder its administration.

Protestors were encouraged to apply for a paper copy of the census form – which to some extent must explain the demand for paper copies for which the National Records of Scotland was so unprepared, and which would have added to the cost of the census. Many delayed returning these forms until the last minute. While the most frequent form of protest was the use of the phrase 'Believer in Biology' for the Religion question, many protestors also decorated their forms and the accompanying envelopes, added glitter and stickers, wrote or folded the form in ways that aimed to make machine reading difficult, and used inks in the suffragette colours of green and purple.

The co-ordinated nature of the protest is clear. Gender-critical Scots learned about the protest from others – either in conversations between family and friends or, more usually, on social media, particularly Twitter. Others subscribed to For Women Scotland's newsletter. Because the census period was so long, it was possible for those who were contemplating such protest actions to see evidence that others had done so, with photographs of highly decorated envelopes or close-ups of the Religion question being

shared online on a daily basis. Thus protestors learned tactics from others, but also realised the size of the movement and were potentially more likely to join.

For Women Scotland firmly positioned these actions within the history of the suffragettes. In the UK, gender-critical women often make use of the suffragette as an aspirational figure, for example in poster names on Twitter or the use of the suffragette colours of green, purple and white, as a way of imbuing their cause with history and legitimacy. When it comes to censuses, the figure of the suffragette has an even greater importance – the evasion and resistance of the suffragettes in 1911 has become an important part of women's, local and family histories in the UK, particularly after the release of the census returns in 2009. For Women Scotland called on their followers to emulate the suffragettes in using the census to send a message to the Scottish Government and also to the future. They envisaged 'our grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters' seeing evidence of women's resistance one hundred years in the future. And it is clear that many of the respondents saw their protest in these terms, with reference to the suffragettes in their answers to the survey, in the decorations to forms and envelopes, and in the way they positioned themselves within their own family history and their determination to send a message to the future.

The 2009 release of the 1911 census forms was of enormous benefit for historians since it allowed access to the protests and private sympathies of many women (and men) who believed in women's right to a parliamentary vote. The Scots who used the 2022 census to protest the Scottish Government's policies on sex and gender identity expected that the same would be true for them. However, data-protection policies mean that much of the protest will not be archived and available for tomorrow's historians. The use of 'Believer in Biology' will be recorded, and it will be very interesting to see how many used this formulation when figures for responses to the Religion question are released. But the decorations, glitter, ribbons and drawings will have disappeared. That is why it is important to preserve at least a flavour of these protests via this project.

Professor Lindsay Paterson suggested that controversies over questions relating to sex and national identity may have contributed to the comparatively low rate of returns of the 2022 Scottish census. However, this project suggests that, instead of leading to boycotts, controversy over the question relating to sex contributed to the high demand

for paper copies of the census form and to the necessity of extending the deadline, all of which will have had a cost. This was certainly the opinion of For Women Scotland in its submission to the CEEAC Committee's Inquiry into the Scottish Census. Describing the census as a 'monumental folly' and a 'worthless exercise of fiction', For Women Scotland suggested that 'Many women channelled their anger and annoyance by ordering paper copies on which they could write messages expressing this frustration' (Inquiry into Scotland's Census, 2022). For Women Scotland also noted that one of the arguments for allowing self-identification of sex in the Scottish census had been to maximise returns. They suggested that, in fact, the impact had been to lower public engagement and to make the 2022 Scottish census valueless as far as data relating to sex was concerned.

The determination of many participants to make their form impossible to be read by a machine, to throw a 'metaphorical spanner into official machinery', will presumably also have a cost as the processing of the returns gets under way. Historians have suggested that participation in the action against the census in 1911 was of profound psychological and symbolic importance to the women involved. It is clear that this is also true of the participants in this project. They made use of this official, civic moment to send a message to the Scottish Government, and this message was driven by a tremendous anger and frustration because they felt that they were not being listened to.

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TABLES

Table 1: age breakdown of respondents

| Age of respondent | Percentage of responses (%) |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 18-24 | 0 |
| 25-34 | 2 |
| 35-44 | 11 |
| 45-55 | 33 |
| 56-64 | 33 |
| 65+ | 21 |