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Why we march! Feminist activism in critical times: Lessons from the women's march on Washington**

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ABSTRACT

As professors, we have witnessed, anecdotally, a shift in doing social justice advocacy teaching. We have witnessed within some of our classrooms a more empowered hostility and intolerance to conversations pertaining to social justice. We agree that this phenomenon is pedagogical because this language usage not only teaches, but also legitimizes hate speech. We have witnessed the illogical extension of this hate speech with an increase in hate crimes across the country since the 2016 election. Without peaceful protest and grassroots feminist activism, we fear that this speech, this pedagogy, will spread even more violent forms of hate. This research was conducted in and around the first Women's March of 2017. We wanted to know: What were marchers' prior histories of political activism prior to the election? If this was their first time participating in such a manner, how did the election and its early political fallout inspire marchers to attend? 2) What plans did marchers have for political activism after the march? 3) What can be learned from these participants about the current state of political activism in our current era? A total of 788 individuals had taken part in the online survey. Among the participants, 45% marched on Washington, and 55% participated in the march in their local cities. We found that issues of gender equality were of great concern to many of the marchers. In particular, issues related to economic and social equity, including salary. These findings are interesting as they speak to the broader implications of gender equality. And, as the past few years have demonstrated, these issues continue to be of concern.

Introduction

The day after the election... I was traveling to Iowa, with a layover at Chicago O'Hare. The purpose? To facilitate a diversity training at a community college in Iowa. I was scared. My college students were contacting me. They were scared. One student said to me, “How am I going to live in the world now?” I cried in the airport. That evening, at the hotel restaurant I witnessed a female server describe to another female server how she had just been grabbed by her genitals by an intoxicated man. “It’s open season,” I thought.

(Marcher/Author 1)

Three hundred thousand plus pink hats were the omnipresent symbol for the Women's March on Washington, in Washington, D.C., on January 21, 2017, the day after the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump. Most hand-made, these hats were a grassroots provocation in response to Trump’s profane comment about grabbing women by their genitals. Using language that attempts to make sexual assault permissible is not acceptable—and that was just one of the messages of the march held round the world.

The Women's March on Washington, one million strong, inspired sister marches in all 50 U.S. States (including 415 virtual marches), comprising 3.3 million Americans, and in 92 other countries on all seven continents—this worldwide solidarity is unprecedented (Ms. Magazine, 2017). As Gloria Steinem stated, “This is an outpouring of energy and true democracy like I have never seen in my very long life. It is wide in age. It is deep in diversity” (Ms. Magazine, p. 8). Han, Sparks, and Deshmukh Towery (2017) argue that in the twenty-first century, an important aspect of grassroots activism is the combination of digital and more traditional forms of engagement; technologies have enabled rapid changes in participation and levels of engagement.

As we stood among the mass of humanity at the Women's March on Washington, participating in the largest march on Washington in history, we felt a sense of solidarity—as all of us were united under an umbrella of common causes: the prevalent denominator being the preservation of our hard-won civil rights. Although we had personal reasons for attending the march, we sought to determine why others were marching. Were most of these marchers politically active prior to the election? Did the election and the subsequent political fallout inspire some to engage in activism for the first time? Would their activism...

** Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly admit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress—Frederick Douglass.

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continue after this momentous and historical day?

As professors, we have witnessed, anecdotally, a shift in engaging in social justice pedagogy. We have witnessed within some of our classrooms a more empowered hostility and intolerance to conversations pertaining to social justice. Ringrose and Showunmi (2016) helpfully devised a concept they call “Trump Pedagogy.” Or, “...a form of popular speech that is supposed to be hard hitting, honest and reflective of the ‘common interest,’ but is actually hate-speech and a rejection of global equality initiatives and human rights” (para. 3). We agree that this phenomenon is pedagogical because this language usage not only teaches, but also legitimizes hate speech. We have witnessed the illogical extension of this hate speech with an increase in hate crimes across the country since the election of the 45th president. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that hate crimes are on the rise, up 20% since the 2016 election (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Without peaceful protest and grassroots feminist activism, we fear that Trump Pedagogy will spread even more violent forms of hate.

Research is beginning to illustrate the changes we have noticed anecdotally. Since the 2016 election, 70% of students polled said they had witnessed bullying, harassment, and hate messages (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). In 2018, Huang and Cornell reported their results from polling 155,000 seventh and eighth grade students in 2013, 2015, and 2017. The goal was to determine if political affiliation is correlated with an increase in bullying in schools. Their findings illustrate that locales with high Trump support also display higher rates of school bullying than in previous years, especially victimized are Students of Color and other students possessing non-hegemonic statuses, such as non-Christian religious affiliations. In sum, the politics of adults affect the attitudes and behaviors of children.

The first Women’s March on Washington was in 1913, organized by Alice Paul, and attended by Mary Church Terrell and Jane Addams (Becker, 2017); it focused primarily on issues of gender and class. Over 100 years later, organizers expanded the concept of feminism to include all forms of oppression, and to seek to protect the civil rights of all historically marginalized groups. As Kimberlé Crenshaw indicated, “The Women’s March reflected the intersectional aspects of our lives and how we experience the world” (Ms. Magazine, p. 8). To wit, our democracy cannot thrive if any of its citizens are insulted, assaulted, discriminated against and devalued. Around the world, we must strive together to challenge patriarchy – as well as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and all forms of discrimination, and their harmful effects. The 2017 Women’s March on Washington was a tremendous opportunity to refocus our attention and recommit ourselves to this important work. We knew why we were marching. We wanted to discover why others were.

The idea of the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, to take place on the day after the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States, was a collaboration of activists who broached the idea of the march on Facebook. Teresa Shook, Vanessa Wruble, Evvie Harmon, and Bob Bland soon combined their efforts, which led to thousands of people signing up via social media to march. The founders from the start worked to ensure that the movement was intersectional and inclusive.

Organizers originally expected 200,000 marchers, but the event ultimately drew 400,000–500,000 marchers to D.C., and the Metro system had its second-busiest day in history—with over one million recorded rides, and no arrests. The New York Times reported that the crowds of the Women’s March were three times the size of Trump’s inauguration, which they estimate at 160,000 attendees.

Review of the literature

Freedom, then becomes not a state for which one years, but rather an incessant struggle to remake our lives, our relations, our communities, and our futures—Angela Davis

Intersectional feminism and feminist activism

Sara Ahmed, Roxanne Gay, and Brittney Cooper all wrestle with the idea of how to be a feminist when contradictions within our lived experiences conflict with our perceptions of what a feminist “should be.” As Cooper argues, “…many young people don’t see ‘feminism’ as just a set of politics but as an identity that they must take on and perform… Feminism, it seems, comes saddled with its own baggage as an identity politic” (p. 704). We understand that many young people chose not to self-identify as feminists, while also holding the same personal and political ideals as self-identified feminists, for fear of being attached to the stigmatized label (Aronson, 2003). According to Feely (2013), “…the Girl Power movement became separated from its feminist core. . . . No wonder students are confused about feminism” (p. 595). Additionally, the demonization of feminism is still a popular trope within various media outlets.

What is known as liberal feminism is a vehicle to strive for gender parity through existing political and institutional structures. Critical intersectional feminism, on the other hand, inherently critiques the problems within said systems—as well as issues with liberal or “white” feminism for its lack of focus on issues facing Women of Color (Clark, Prentiss, & Nickels, 2018). Critical intersectional feminism delves into how multiple identity markers shape one’s experience in society and differs in terms of economics, politics, and social interactions; multiple oppressions are linked and must be conceptualized together (Clark et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1993). Although liberal, or traditionally “white” feminism, has been critiqued and even repudiated by some scholars and activists, many critical and queer scholars of Color have worked to create a new vision of feminism in theory, activism, and practice (Clark et al., 2018; hooks, 2000; Love, 2019).

Prior to the election of 2016, there were two dominant social scripts within popular media regarding feminism (Martin, Nickels, & Sharp-Grier, 2017). One of these scripts is “empowerment feminism,” where individuals are free to define feminism on their own terms, devoid of a specific political platform; this script may have evolved through third-wave feminist texts occurring within the echo chamber of social media within a neoliberal capitalist post-everything milieu. Sounding good on its face, it ultimately served to separate people from coming together as a collective because there are not necessarily any shared collective goals. The second script is the post-feminist myth: that the goals of feminism have already been achieved, and thus feminism is no longer necessary. The election of 2016 may be the catalyst to merge these two lines of thinking into a new radical intersectional feminism and a radical intersectional feminist activism, where specific political goals are defined and achieved collectively.

“Anything goes” feminism stems from the neoliberal invention of “empowerment feminism,” which is individualistic in nature and does nothing to unpack or to fight the systemic institutional, societal, and cultural systems and constraints fostering oppression and maintaining patriarchal and racist barriers. The inherent critiques of the aforementioned hegemonic structures within radical feminism disappeared with empowerment feminism, and replaced institutional and societal critiques with individual responsibility, the myth of the meritocracy, and the devaluation of collection action. Ringrose and Walkerdone (2008), pulling from McRobbie, extend her conception of the “post-feminist masquerade,” where liberation no longer comes in the form of protests of social, sexual, and political inequities; instead, now feminism is revealed through the freedom of shopping and style—feminism as co-opted by corporations.

The other “feminist” script is that we now are living in a post-feminist milieu, where feminism is no longer necessary because all of the battles have been fought and won, and women have achieved full equality; there are no problems but for the ones individually created. Instead, each individual is responsible for their own realities—again a neoliberal falsehood (Ringrose, 2007; Ringrose & Walkerdone, 2008). According to Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, and Livingstone (2013), “The
concept of ‘postfeminism’ helps unpack and critique a contemporary sensibility that positions society as ‘beyond’ feminism, where it is supposed that feminist goals of social and political equality have been met, making the need for feminism now obsolete...” (p. 306). The underlying purposes of this ideology are to devalue feminist gains, and to dismantle current and future intersectional feminist activism.

According to Bay-Cheng (2015), the neoliberal agenda, which has infiltrated popular culture, champions “...self-interested striving through depoliticized tropes of personal empowerment...” (p. 280). Neoliberalism heightens postfeminism, where financial and business success on individual levels supersede political struggle and solidarity (Weber, 2010). Further, as Weber argues, “Neoliberalism disallows systemic injustices (like racism or sexism), arguing instead that in a free market, all players compete on a level playing field and thus rise or fall strictly on the strengths of their merit and effort...” (p. 127). According to Ringrose and Walkerdine, the post-feminist moment involves a re-interpretation of feminist activism and history, in favor of a script that tells the story of gender equality, and the obsolescence of feminism in general. Clearly, intersectional feminism has been misrepresented within the media and in popular culture in the interest of capitalism and neoliberalism. It will take intersectional feminist activism to alter this discourse.

The feminist movement ebbs and flows, experiencing periods of growth, as well as shrinkages, and backlashes (Reger, 2012). We argue that we are at the end of a period of backlash, and that the election of 2016 has served as a catalyst to invigorate intersectional feminist activism. Grassroots feminist activism presupposes a bottom up approach to social change organizing and mobilization. Intersectional grassroots feminist activism implies bottom up mobilization, and concerns that include issues of racial, socioeconomic, disability, and LGBTQ+ justice, just to name a few. Intersectional grassroots feminist activism is a unique frame through which to view, interpret, and interact with the world.

A “frame” is a rhetorical device that encourages particular types of interpretations. Frame analysis is a process to understand how people view situations, and interpret or process information. According to Snow, Rochford Jr, Worden, and Benford (1986), there are four different types of frames: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation. Of these, frame transformation is most relevant to this study. Frame transformation involves completely changing the rhetoric of the current state of affairs, and creating new values that have not been previously considered (Clark et al., 2018).

The literature on social movements explains how different activists can gain more influence than others, mobilize others differently, and frame their movements differently, involving innovation, agency, and strategy (Ganz, 2000). When faced with new challenges, activist leaders use their knowledge to create unique solutions in order to inspire engagement (Ganz, 2000). According to Ganz (2002):

Organizers motivate action by deepening people’s understanding of who they are, what they want, and why. Mobilizing feelings of anger, courage, hopefulness, self worth, community and urgency, they challenge feelings of fear, despair, self doubt, isolation, and apathy that inhibit action. They help people articulate their values as a shared story of challenges they face, why they must face them, and why others should help-rooted in who they are, where they’ve been, where they want to go. (p. 16)

According to Han (2016), organizational context has a strong influence on individual choice to engage in activism; that is, the choice to participate in political activism may result from inspiring social interactions between current and potential activists. We theorize that after the 2016 election, people from around the world were more motivated to speak out, whether virtually or in-person, to protest the ableist, racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric of the new president, and that many of these people were inspired to engage from online interactions with the organizers of The Women’s March via social media. In sum, according to Han (2016), activism is crucial in making democracy work, and it is on the rise as technology changes how we do activism.

However, Naple (2013a) argues that face-to-face organizing is more effective in activist efforts to retain control over the movement narrative. That being said, intersectional feminist praxis, such as the Women’s March on Washington, and its sister marches around the world, are designed so that knowledge creation develops from the lived experiences of the activists; these lived experiences inherently contribute to the knowledge construction of intersectional feminist and intersectional feminist praxis, and to our understanding of inequality and oppression (Naples, 2013b). naples, inspired by Paulo Freire’s concept of “conscientizacao” (1970)—in that many intersectional feminist actors have created empowerment strategies in non-hierarchical forms, conceive of empowerment as a “counterhegemonic” project. For example, intersectional feminist praxis prioritizes local struggles that intersect with regional, national, and transnational politics.

Reasons for engagement

In the U.S., and globally, protest politics and the politics of dissent are often demonized and sometimes criminalized, on the one hand, and, on the other, dismissed as “useless or ineffective” (Choudry, 2015, p. 6).

Activist movements are made up of individuals, and not primarily professional activists, who truly become the catalysts for change. The “great person” narrative, consisting of a grand leader necessary for change to occur is a myth, and reproduces a narrative of political change as dependent on individual achievements or charisma; this undermines the real on-the-ground part-time activists doing the work (Choudry, 2015). Much can be said for collective action, and strength in numbers, as opposed to focusing on movement leaders.

According to Norris (2002), there are three main catalysts of “mass activism”: low electoral turnout, rising anti-party sentiment, and the decay of civic organization. Social movements with the goal of protest politics battle the prejudiced oppression placed on minorities. How does a global society deal with such anguish? As Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws” (as cited in Green, 2014). Peaceful protests are a positive way to bring diverse groups of people together to create one voice against the oppressor. According to Cooper, the election of 2016 brought intersectional feminist issues back to the fore, “In an era when we are experiencing a renewal of the war on women, through a severe reduction in access to abortion clinics and a pervasive rape culture that seems to have seen no abatement, women, cis and trans alike, need feminism more than ever” (p. 704). Since the Women’s March on Washington in 2017, more people of all ages are ready to engage in political activism (Alter, 2017). There are some common reasons why people choose to now engage in feminist activism.

Thousands of people chose to get involved in feminism activism after the 2016 election for intersectional reasons, such as, defending women’s rights and the rights of other minorities who will be made vulnerable by Trump (Alter, 2017). The fear of oppression was and is in the air. As one marcher, Cheyenne, stated, “I feel like a lot of rights that we have are in danger. We’re scared, and this is the only thing we can think of to at least try to do to help make things better” (as quoted in Vick, 2017). After the 2016 election, many marchers asked themselves what was “scarier,” engaging in activism for the first time, or doing nothing while hard-fought civil rights were eroded. Despite a fear of engagement, many choose to partake in activism for the first time. The idea of protecting freedoms mixed with the fear of losing rights is the common equation that inspired people to the streets (Alter, 2017).

Protecting hard-won rights and freedoms, and the fear of losing them, are not the only reasons why people choose to become active in social justice issues after the 2016 election. Vick, (2017) explains another reason, “People are moved by the sense of possibility, a sense of hope” (as quoted in Vick, p. 26). It is this sense of hope that inspires...
people, a sense of coming together to create change. As one marcher stated, "I'll have to focus on the areas that I have in common with the marginalized community, not on the distinctions that would separate us" (as cited in Alter, 2017). That is how and why diverse groups of people can peacefully march together even though they may not all be there for the same exact reason; they can come together for a common end goal. As Andiola stated, "Part of organizing is that we’re not all going to be marching in the same rhythm" (as cited in Vick, 2017).

Children marched beside their parents, and older men and women mingled with millennials. These issues bring together a mixing of ideology that inspires more to get involved (Holmstrom, 2017).

People become passionate for social activism because of the feeling of belonging, being a part of something that is bigger than the self. Individuals who want their voices to be heard can have them magnified by the collective. This is why social activism is linked to freedom of speech; it allows people to get out into the streets and use their voices for a particular political purpose, and to come together with others who feel the same. The overall goal is to have people from different backgrounds advocate for their own communities (Levitov, 2017). According to Levitov and Kaaland (2017), “It is logical that students are more likely to become effective and active members of society if they are allowed more participation in their own educational decision-making, from research topic choice to analyzing their learning and engaging in meaningful thinking and analysis” (p. 6). The reason for marching comes from wanting to join others who are using their freedom of speech for a cause (Levitov, 2017). Freedom is of value to everyone, and it gives people the right to take to the streets and sound their voices (Levitov, 2017).

According to Schussman and Soule (2005), individuals possessing the following characteristics are more likely to become engaged in political activism: an interest in politics, access to information, self-efficacy, and a liberal orientation. Being invited by another person to engage in activism makes some people more likely to engage in protest; however, there are some who engage in protest of their own accord (Benford & Snow, 2000). According to Whittier (1997), despite generational consistency within movement politics, new recruits can do much to redefine values and trajectories of movements. We see this within the women’s movement. Once focused only on issues impacting women, (i.e., white women), the movement is now intersectional. Weldon and Htun (2013) argue that women’s autonomous social activism within society impacts policy change in the interest of progressive social policies. Intersectional feminist activism communicates the points of view of various marginalized groups, and can have the power to impact public opinion. Movements such as the Women’s March on Washington is an example of inspiring activism to influence policymakers to be sympathetic to their goals.

Methods

Positionality

We are both white women professors working at Predominantly White Institutions in the disciplines of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership. We both consider ourselves to be feminists, and have engaged in previous forms of activism. One is a full tenured professor, and one is an assistant professor. The lead researcher attended the march in D.C., and the other author attended a march in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Methodological approach

We investigate this topic through an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw, 1993), paying particular attention to the intersectional identities of the marchers. Our conception of feminism is the philosophy that drives the action to end all forms of oppression (Martin, 2015). This lens allows for the interrogation of social, educational, and political factors that impact our milieu (Chapman, 2007), with the end goal of social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Our intersectional feminist lens drives us to seek to determine how oppression is perpetuated, for the purposes of undermining of all forms of bias within systems and institutions. Our lens is also informed by Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectuals emerging from grassroots social movements, and knowledge creation through praxis. We are cautioned by Naples (2013b), as she reminds us, intersectional feminist praxis presupposes that intentionality must be paired with strategies for empowerment.

We conducted this study to illuminate the perspectives of individuals whose voices are traditionally marginalized. Conventionally, research models have reflected the temporal and cultural standpoints of dominant groups. They have reflected and strengthened the perspectives of the dominant norm, which have, at best, reinforced stereotypical notions regarding minority groups in general, and, at worst, contributed to the dehumanization of said groups (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Sharp-Grier & Martin, 2016).

Data collection and context

In our desperation after the 2016 election: the political and social fall out as a result (e.g., increases in hate crimes and online and in-person harassment of women and other historically marginalized people), we needed to feel “of use.” And, we wanted to take the temperature of the country, as much as we could, perhaps to prognosticate where the future would lead us: would the 2017 Women's March inspire more individuals and groups to become more actively engaged politically? And, so, we created a survey, and attempted to inspire marchers to take it: either during the march, on their phones, or later when they got home. (Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the online survey.)

The lead researcher passed out more than 300 cards with links to an online survey as well as a QR code to the survey to other marchers at the Women’s March on Washington in D.C. in 2017. She also shared the survey link on social media, and through the American Educational Research Association and Women's Studies listservs. The lead researcher expanded the participant poll through snowball sampling to include participants in any of the sister marches taking place on January 21, 2017.

The research questions guiding this study were: 1). What were marchers’ prior histories of political activism prior to the election? If this was their first time participating in such a manner, how did the election and its early political fallout inspire marchers to attend? 2). What plans did marchers have for political activism after the march? 3). What can be learned from these participants about the state of political activism in our current era?

We collected data during the Women’s March on Washington, January 21, 2017, the day after Donald J. Trump’s inauguration. The lead author/researcher passed out approximately 300 cards containing a link and a code to an online survey. By the end of the march and in the days after, 788 people had taken the online survey. Among the participants, 45% marched on Washington, and 55% participated in a march in their local cities.

Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1. In this table, the first characteristic was a measure of age in years, which is described using mean and standard deviation in the first column. The remaining descriptors were categorical, with the percentages given in the second column.

The majority of participants in this study were White, heterosexual females. The widest diversity observed among participants was in their political party affiliation, although here too the majority identified as Democrat.

Data analysis

Recognizing reflexivity involves acknowledging the ways in which
Participant background characteristics (N = 787).

| Characteristic                  | Mean (SD) | Percent |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Age in years                   | 44.9 (15.0) |         |
| Gender                         |           |         |
| Female                         | 87.3      |         |
| Male                           | 5.6       |         |
| Non-binary/self-described      | 2.0       |         |
| Prefer not to say              | 5.0       |         |
| Sexual Orientation             |           |         |
| Straight/heterosexual          | 73.2      |         |
| Lesbian or gay                 | 8.4       |         |
| Bisexual/self-described        | 12.1      |         |
| Prefer not to say              | 6.3       |         |
| Race/Ethnicity                 |           |         |
| Asian/Asian American           | 0.6       |         |
| Black/African American         | 0.9       |         |
| Hispanic/Latino                | 2.2       |         |
| Jewish                         | 3.0       |         |
| Mixed/multi-ethnic             | 3.2       |         |
| White/Caucasian                | 78.9      |         |
| Other                          | 5.0       |         |
| Prefer not to say              | 6.2       |         |
| Party Affiliation              |           |         |
| Democratic                     | 73.2      |         |
| Republican                     | 0.9       |         |
| Independent                    | 13.6      |         |
| Socialist/Democratic Socialist | 1.0       |         |
| Progressive                    | 1.0       |         |
| Radical Left/Leftist           | 0.4       |         |
| Liberal                        | 0.4       |         |
| Feminist                       | 0.3       |         |
| Green                          | 0.8       |         |
| Other                          | 0.8       |         |
| None/Prefer not to say         | 6.5       |         |
| Not an American Citizen        | 1.3       |         |

“our own agendas” impact our research at all points, including analysis, and interpretation (Hesse Biber, 2012, p. 17). Moreover, our recognition of the reflexive process similarly demands that we consider our own biases, and how they impact what we choose to study, our motivations for the analysis, and our methodological approach to study (Hesse Biber, 2012). As critical feminist scholars and activists, this topic is one of personal, political, and scholarly significance. We practiced content validation in order to ensure not only applicability but authenticity of information and interpretation (Carlson, 2010; Hesse Biber, 2012).

We used Saldana’s (2016) approach to thematic analysis in order to develop codes from our data. The process yielded seven themes that were consistent across the three open-ended questions. Table 2 shows the resulting themes, our definition of the theme, codes that were used in the development of the theme, and exemplar comments that illustrate the themes.

In general, the findings from Table 2 demonstrate the emergent process undertaken with data coding. From 787 participants, we coded 5732 statements into the codes and finally the themes identified. We then entered these codes into SPSS software version 11.0. We identified participants’ responses by major themes as well as by the categories that made up each theme. We determined these themes and codes across the three questions addressing why the participants marched, what they hoped to accomplish, and what concerned them most about the 2016 election. The total number of categories identified by participants across their responses concerning why they marched ranged from zero to 18, for what they hoped to accomplish ranged from zero to 12, and for what concerned them in the 2016 election ranged from zero to 40. For the major themes, we collapsed the responses to identify the number of categories that the participant identified within each theme. We then re-coded these measures (seven measures for each of three questions for a total of 21) in two ways.

First, we dichotomized each measure to determine whether the participant identified any of the categories in that theme as relevant, giving each participant a “yes” or “no” code for each theme. As such, the percentage of participants who identified each theme could total more than 100%, as one person could have identified more than one theme in their responses. Then, we created a new measure that captured, across the seven major themes, which theme in which they had the most responses for each question. This indicator had seven categories, with the percent of participants who identified each category as the strongest adding to 100% (including no theme identified as “No response given”). Finally, for two of the themes (gender issues and issues other than gender), we further analyzed the distribution of individual category responses, first across the entire sample, and then only for those participants who identified that theme as their strongest response.

Results

Distribution of participant responses by general coding categories

We examined the coded responses across all participants concerning three main questions: (1) why the participants chose to participate in the Women’s March, (2) what they hoped to accomplish, and (3) what most concerned them about the 2016 election. The percentage of participants giving each of these categories in their responses is shown in Fig. 1, with responses to “Why I marched” shown with black bars, “Hoped to accomplish,” shown with white bars, and “Greatest concern 2016 election” shown with gray bars.

There are many interesting findings to note from this figure. First, the largest portion of participants reported protest and dissent as their reasons to march (63.2%), followed by issues other than gender (43.6%) and gender issues (40.9%). Similarly, a striking portion of participants reported showing protest and dissent as what they hoped to accomplish (81.3%). Of the seven areas (including no response), only four showed much response in participants’ concerns for the 2016 election – gender issues (43.7%), issues other than gender (28.5%), protest and dissent (26.9%), and no response (15.9%). While it is encouraging that very few responses indicated that they expected to accomplish nothing for each of the three questions, it is worth noting that more than a fifth of the participants provided no response to the question of why they marched (21.4%).

Because participant responses in each of these three main questions could have more than one coded response, it is also important to examine each area for participants’ strongest category. Unlike in Fig. 1, in Fig. 2, each distribution for each question totals 100%. This figure is otherwise constructed in the same manner as Fig. 1. Viewing participant responses in this manner illuminates the true significance of the marchers’ motivations and concerns.

Perhaps the most striking result shown in Fig. 2 is the very large portion (82.8%) of participants who identified gender issues as their strongest response to the question asking about their greatest concern after the 2016 election. From this, we can conclude that the status and safety of individuals of all gender identities were a concern. The next highest portion had the strongest response to issues other than gender (12.6%). When examining the distribution of participants’ strongest response to why they marched, the largest reason identified was issues other than gender (28.6%), closely followed by gender issues (20.8%) and protest and dissent (18.7%). When asked what they hoped to accomplish, the largest portion identified protest and dissent as their strongest response (34%), followed by gender issues (29.7%), and solidarity or empowerment (26.6%). While no participants gave no response to the second and third question, a fifth of them did not respond to the question of why they marched (21.4%).
Distribution of participant responses of gender issues

Gender issues were an important area as to both why participants marched, and their greatest concerns after the 2016 election. It is useful to examine the codes within this category to learn more detailed information about the types of responses made. Fig. 3 shows the distribution of coded responses within this category for all participants, with the responses to “Why I marched” in black bars and “Greatest concern of the 2016 election” in gray bars.

The largest response level in this figure is for concerns about equal
pay as a reason to march (41% indicated this area as a reason); yet very few participants identified this issue as their greatest concern in the 2016 election (2.8%). Other reasons for marching that were identified by a larger portion of participants overall were to support feminism (19%), and to challenge misogyny and patriarchy (17%). Responses that were reported the most across all participants for their concerns about the election were supporting reproductive rights and health (22.5%), sexual assault issues (17.8%), and challenging misogyny and patriarchy (16.7%).

When focusing on participants who identified gender issues as their strongest area of response, the patterns were similar but more extreme. Fig. 4 shows the distribution of these participants’ responses (n = 164 for “Why I marched” shown in black bars and n = 652 for “Greatest concern of the 2016 election shown in gray bars).

The largest response level in this figure was again for concerns about equal pay as a reason to march (93% indicated this area as a reason), yet an even smaller portion of these participants identified this issue as their greatest concern in the 2016 election (1.8%). Other reasons for marching that were identified by a larger portion of these participants were again to support feminism (48%) and to challenge misogyny and patriarchy (39%). Responses that were reported the most across participants who selected gender issues for their concerns about the election were quite similar to the distribution of the full sample—supporting reproductive rights and health (20%), sexual assault issues (17%), and challenging misogyny and patriarchy (15%). The similarity could well be due to the fact that a large portion of the participants identified gender issues as their main concern, as noted in Fig. 2.

**Distribution of participant responses by other issues**

As shown in Fig. 2, the largest portion of participants identified issues other than gender as the strongest reason they marched, and this area was the second highest category identified as the strongest concern of the 2016 election. It is useful to examine the codes within this category to learn more detailed information about the types of responses made in these two areas. Fig. 5 shows the distribution of coded responses within this category for all participants, constructed in the same manner as Fig. 3.

The two codes that were identified by the largest portion of all participants were social class (43.6%) and human rights (21.6%). Interestingly, a very small portion of participants identified either of these areas as a concern in the 2016 election (2.9% and 4.3% respectively). While the distribution of these codes was small for concerns about the election when examined across all participants, the largest responses were to racism (8.4%), LGBTQ+ (8.3%), and health care (7%). These response levels were similar as those reported for reasons for marching.

When focusing on participants who identified issues other than gender as their strongest area of response, the patterns were similar, but, again, more extreme. Fig. 6 shows the distribution of these participants’ responses (n = 225 for “Why I marched” shown in black bars and n = 99 for “Greatest concern of the 2016 election” shown in gray bars).

Every participant who identified issues other than gender as the strongest reason they marched indicated social class (100%), but, again, only a small portion of those who indicated this area as their strongest concern about the election did so (6.2%). After social class, over half of these participants identified human rights as a concern (55.1%), and about a third indicated LGBTQ+ issues (34.2%), racism (32%), and supporting disempowered people in general (30.2%). For those participants who identified issues other than gender as their strongest area of concern about the 2016 election, the largest portion of these people identified (in descending order) racism (43.3%),
immigration/the wall (37.4%), and LGBTQ+ issues (35.4%).

In general, it can be concluded from these data that issues of gender equality were of great concern to many of the marchers, in particular, issues related to economic and social equity, including salary. These findings are interesting as they speak to the broader implications of gender equality. And, as the past few years have demonstrated, these issues continue to be of concern.

Discussion and conclusions

The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change—James Baldwin

After the election, I found it difficult to even turn on the news. For me, this was not a typical election. I was accustomed to my preferred candidates losing, but this time it was different. It was personal. It was an affront. It was an attack. Attending the march made me feel there was some kind of hope. Helping students register to vote was also an affirming act for me.

(Marcher/author)

Since the Women’s March on Washington in 2017, an almost innumerable amount of concerning events has taken place at the hand of the Trump Administration. Despite advances in the public discourse over issues of sexual violence (re: the “Me Too,” and “Time’s Up” movements), women’s experiences and credibility seem to still up for debate. This issue was particularly evident in the hearings for the successful Trump nominee for Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh. As the world watched, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified with the candor and specificity of a professor of psychology who had experienced sexual trauma, and understood the neurological implications of such events. Yet, while the particular function and forum for her testimony was unique, her experiences were not. Sexual assault and harassment continue to be a reality for the vast majority of women, many of whom live and study on college campuses (Brown, 2018). In the end, Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony was deafened by Judge Kavanaugh’s overwhelming privilege. It would be interesting to revisit the questions posed to the participants at the Women’s March on Washington with these same participants. Are we feeling less passionate or more emboldened by the actions of the president and others in power?

This reality poses important questions for academics as well as educators. How will we continue to encourage voice and agentic social action for people of all gender identities? How can the continued delegitimization of women’s experiences be countered? Despite the frustrations many of us have faced in the years since his election, the Presidency of Donald Trump will most certainly stand as a turning point in progressive social movements. We are currently faced with the global pandemic that is Covid-19. As we sit, sheltering-in-place, digital social activism decry the administration’s blatant disregard of the seriousness of this crisis, the implications of which are yet untold. We look to activists for the hope that is so necessary during our unprecedented times.

Fig. 3. Comparing the summary of all participants (N = 787) on responses concerning gender issues that were reasons to march and that were concerns in the 2016 election.
Fig. 4. Comparing the summary of participants who chose gender issues as their strongest response on reasons to march (N = 164) and that were concerns in the 2016 election (N = 652).

Fig. 5. Comparing the summary of all participants (N = 787) on responses concerning issues other than gender that were reasons to march and that were concerns in the 2016 election.
Appendix A. Appendix

Survey

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
   Please specify

2. What is your gender?
   Female
   Male
   Non-binary/Third gender
   Transgender
   Prefer not to say
   Prefer to self-describe (please specify)

3. What is your sexual orientation?
   Straight/Heterosexual
   Lesbian or Gay
   Bisexual
   Prefer not to say
   Prefer to self-describe (please specify)

4. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

5. What is your political party identification?
   Democrat
   Republican
   Independent

6. What is your political party identification?

   Other (please specify)

Questions About Your Decision To March:

1. Did you march in Washington DC or in another city?
   I marched in Washington DC
   I marched in a different city (please specify)

2. Please use the space below to describe why you chose to participate in the Women's March today.

3. What did you hope to accomplish through your participation in the Women's March today.

4. What specific events related to women and gender during the 2016 presidential campaign and election caused you the greatest concern?

5. Have you engaged in activism related to women's/gender issues before today?
   Yes
   No

6. Do you plan to engage in other forms of activism related to women's/gender issues in the future?
   Yes
   No

7. As a result of the 2016 presidential campaign and election are you...
   a. Much more politically active than you were before

Fig. 6. Comparing the summary of participants whose strongest response was to issues other than gender on responses that were reasons to march (N = 225) and that were concerns in the 2016 election (N = 99).
b. Somewhat more politically active than you were before

c. Slightly more politically active than you were before

d. No more and no less politically active than you were before

e. Slightly less politically active than you were before

f. Somewhat less politically active than you were before

g. Much less politically active than you were before

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