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Why I campaigned for a feminist statue outside Parliament

Women need to be seen – and heard – in our public spaces

Since campaigning to get a woman's face onto British bank notes, Caroline Criado-Perez has become a household name in the UK. The writer and feminist campaigner is now turning her attention to London's Parliament Square, where a statue of suffragist leader Millicent Fawcett will finally take its place alongside the eleven male political figures already represented. She explains why visual female representation is so important in the battle for gender equality.

By the age of six, girls have already stopped believing that 'brilliance' is a female trait. A US study last year found that five year old girls were as likely as five year old boys to think women could be 'really really smart'. But by the time they turned six, something changed. They started doubting their gender. So much so, in fact, that they started limiting themselves: if a game was presented to them as intended for 'children who are really, really smart', five year old girls were as likely to want to play it as boys — but six year old girls were suddenly uninterested.

It starts with not wanting to play a game. But as girls get older, they start making other choices. They start shying away from that subject at school. They decide not to study that course at uni. They don't apply for that job. Studieshavefound that the more a field – computer science for example – is considered to require innate ability to succeed, the fewer women there will be studying it – and ultimately, working within it. An analysis of over 14 million reviews on RateMyProfessors.com found that male professors were three times more likely to be described as a 'genius' as female professors.

And of course it's not just kids who are susceptible: it's their teachers and parents too. Studiesfrom around the world have all found that parents rate their sons as more intelligent than their daughters. Fathers also rate themselves as more intelligent than mothers. Severalstudieshave found

that academic letters of recommendation are more likely to describe male students as outstanding or exceptional, whereas female students are more likely to be described as hard workers or team players.

But why do we believe women aren't as intellectually gifted as men? After all, we're bombarded with scare stories about how girls are outperforming boys at school, how (at least in the UK and US) girls are now more likely to go to university. That white boys are being 'left behind' in this brave new 21st century matriarchy. So where does this lack of belief in girls and women's innate intellectual abilities come from? Answer: everywhere.

It comes from films, where women are not only substantially underrepresented (one study found that only 28 per cent of speaking roles in Hollywood films go to women; another found that men have twice as much screen and speaking time as women), they are also mis-represented. Women in films are young (a study of the 100 top-grossing films of 2015 found that female speaking characters aged 60 and older were 'wholly absent' from 43 of the films compared to only 14 films for men; another study found that men make up 74 per cent of all characters over 40); sexualised (34.3 per cent of female characters were sexily dressed compared to 7.6 per cent of male characters, and 33.4 per cent of female characters were partially nude compared to 10.8 per cent of male characters); and lacking in career ambition (an analysis of US 800 films released between 2007 and 2015 found that male characters were almost 50 per cent more likely to have work-related goals than women; an international study found that only 22.5 per cent of characters holding a job were women).

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It comes from the global news media where women make up only 24 per cent of those seen, heard or read about (lowering to 16 per cent for political news), and where women make up 38 per cent of those quoted recounting their personal experience – but only 19 per cent of experts.

It comes from adverts, where a recent US analysis found that men get about four times as much screen time as women; where men speak seven times more than women; and where male dialogue is more complicated and more likely to include words associated with power and achievement.

In short, it comes from a culture where women are represented as little more than decoration.

And make no mistake: women are affected by these messages. Various

studies have found that watching TV leads to more gender stereotypic attitudes about women's abilities. A study on the impact of advertising found that women were not only likely to perform worse on a maths test if they had been exposed to gender stereotypic ads (one where a young woman who was so excited about being a consumer of a new acne product that she bounced on her bed with joy; another where a woman was 'drooling' with anticipation to try a new brownie mix), but that they were more likely to choose verbal rather than maths questions (these were all undergrads studying calculus and doing well at it), and that they were more likely to express an interest in pursuing academic and professional paths where verbal rather than quantitative abilities were required.

Knowing all this, you may understand why, when I went for a run through London's Parliament Square, I was horrified (if not that shocked) to notice that out of the eleven statues scattered around it, not a single one was of a woman. Girls are already been taught by their teachers, their parents, and their peers, that they aren't as impressive as boys. This is compounded by a media that tells them that they barely exist, and when they do, it's only to please men. And, I realised, even our built environment is adding to the chorus.

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It's not just Parliament Square. If you come across a statue in the UK, the likelihood is that it will be of a man. Out of the 925 statues I counted in the Public Statues and Monuments Association database, I found that 632 were of men. Of those that were women, the vast majority are allegorical or figurative nudes – often there as adoring muses positioned alongside historical men such as Shakespeare or Virgil. Only 25 (2.7 per cent) of Britain's statues are of a non-royal woman who actually existed. Even when you throw royal women into the mix the number only goes up to 71 (7.7 per cent) – and most of those are of Queen Victoria, whose penchant for throwing up statues of herself you have to admire, if only grudgingly. Meanwhile, there are 498 statues of non-royal historical men – in fact there are more statues of men called John (43) than there are of non-royal historical women.

Parliament Square is arguably the most prominent and politically significant square in Britain and this was 2016. I wasn't going to let it

stand. I started a campaign – and a year and a half later we're well on the way to getting a statue of Millicent Fawcett up in time to mark 100 years since the first women won the right to vote in Britain. Millicent Fawcett was the leader of the NUWSS, the non-militant and largest suffrage group in Britain. She was there from the beginning (in 1866 when she was 19 she collected signatures for the first petition for female suffrage to be handed to Parliament) to the end (in 1928 she sat in the Ladies Gallery to witness women being granted the franchise on equal terms with men). She was one of the most important figures involved in the fight to get women the vote – and there isn't a statue of her anywhere in Britain. It's right that she should be the first woman in Parliament Square.

In 1839 Clara Schumann wrote in her diary, 'I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?' There had been female composers who came before her – successful ones who were famous in their day and lived off their compositions. She just hadn't heard of them.

It's time we stop forgetting the women who have come before us and ignoring the women who are around us now. If not for their sakes, then for the girls who grow up not knowing they exist.

This article was first published in November 2017.



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