A Woman’s Fight: The Glasgow Rent Strike 1915

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the actions of women during protest action against rent rises in working-class areas of Glasgow in 1915. It argues that the degree of women’s participation at all levels in the campaign of resistance, was such that the struggle for fair and just rent levels can be legitimately described as ‘a woman’s fight’.

Historical discussion of workers militancy in Glasgow has overshadowed the significant achievements of female protestors. Taking a female perspective, this work provides the background to the disturbances and furnishes details on what women did during their protest. The study also suggests possible sources of their inspiration and discusses the women’s motivation for taking part in actions which involved a degree of risk.

The rent protestors achieved a victory which was of benefit not only to themselves but to working-class tenants in the whole of Britain and therefore deserves to be acknowledged.
**Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<td>GCA</td>
<td>Glasgow City Archive</td>
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<td>GLPHC</td>
<td>Glasgow Labour Party Housing Committee</td>
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<td>GWHA</td>
<td>Glasgow Women’s Housing Association</td>
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<td>ILP</td>
<td>Independent Labour Party</td>
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<td>PRG</td>
<td>Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette</td>
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Source: Author’s photograph

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A Woman’s Fight? The 1915 Glasgow Rent Strike.

‘This was pre-eminently a fight for a poor woman and ... poor women should undertake it.’

John Wheatly¹

On 16th June 1915, John Wheatley, a local councillor, addressed a crowd of 3000-4000 people gathered outside 30 William Street where a family was threatened with eviction. He called on working-class women to fight against rent rises and evictions. Large numbers of ‘poor women’ – the term is understood to mean working-class women - responded to Wheatley’s request, but women had begun the fight several weeks earlier.

Figure 1 Women protestors, Glasgow 1915, exact location unknown, possible St Enoch Square²

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¹ Forward. 19.06.1915
The aim of this work is twofold; firstly, to research female protest behaviour in the 1915 Glasgow rent strike and secondly to provide sufficient evidence of prominent and widespread participation of women in the campaign, to enable it to be called a woman’s fight. It is not argued that the fight was exclusive to women, men and women worked together in the campaign. However, the primary objective is to view the strike from a female perspective, to put women at the core and thus obtain a more nuanced understanding of why women protested. In addition, gender constraints under which women worked and the support they could call on in their struggle, will also be considered.

**Historiography**

In 1915 the country was at war and much of the existing literature of the period focuses on the trauma of human suffering, and on frequently flawed decisions taken by military and government alike. Glasgow was a city where heavy engineering and shipbuilding were the predominant industries and production levels in the city were crucial to the war effort. The network of socialist organisations in Glasgow generated industrial militancy which became the subject of many studies and has led to the use of the term ‘Red Clydeside’. The historical debates have centred round the degree of revolutionary fervour, “How Red was Red Clydeside?” “Does it matter anymore?” or, was there a missed opportunity for revolution, though Iain MacLean dismisses this revolutionary spirit.³ Annemarie Hughes postulates that the class awareness expressed in extreme militancy has led to questions over the revolutionary potential in Glasgow.⁴ Knox describes the period of Red Clydeside as

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⁴ A. Hughes, Gender and Political Identities in Scotland 1919-1939, Scottish Historical Review Monograph Series 17 (Edinburgh, 2010). P. 181.
“…perhaps the most debated and researched …in modern Scotland”.\(^5\) The literature is extensive but carries a male narrative. Lynn Abram’s belief that national histories marginalise women is credible.\(^6\) Books by Lynch, Oliver, Magnusson and even Devine all refer to women taking part in the strike but provide scant detail on their activities.\(^7\) Lynch states that the “notable role taken by women … gave the movement its cutting-edge” but allocates only a few lines to their activities.\(^8\)

Several of the male activists, Willie Gallacher, Harry McShane, Patrick Dollan, have written personal records of their experiences, but give prominence to male activities. Women’s participation is viewed as subordinate to men’s. These accounts by charismatic, controversial figures has perhaps contributed to Breitenbach and Gordon’s view that the lack of visibility of women in the historical record is not due to lack of participation but to gender blindness of the significance of women’s experiences.\(^9\) Those authors such as Joseph Melling and J.J. Smyth who do write about women activists often focus on their relationship with the labour movement in general and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in particular.\(^10\) Katrina Navickas claims it is no longer acceptable to study working-class female action purely in terms of relationship with labour; a criticism which this dissertation aims to avoid.\(^11\)


Only since the latter decades of the twentieth century have feminist writers begun to ‘rescue’ women’s history however, their works tend to be Anglo-centric, concentrate on upper and middle-class feminist issues such as welfare reform and suffrage and have not increased the profile of working-class women. Though Leah Leneman, in her book A Guid Cause, raises the profile of Scottish working-class suffrage campaigners.\textsuperscript{12} Purvis and Summerfield have concentrated on gender inequalities but Navickas suggests that academic studies lack attention on “everyday resistance in industrial urban settings” admitting the difficulties of reconstructing acts of defiance occurring on a quotidian basis.\textsuperscript{13} This difficulty has been encountered in this study as discussed below.

\textit{Methodology}

Research on the impact Glasgow house-wives’ protest activities, has been hampered by the lack of female accounts in the archival record. Of the women activists, only Helen Crawfurd has left a first-hand account in her diary.\textsuperscript{14} Gordon and Breitenbach’s assertion that “it is easier to uncover evidence about the powerful than the powerless” has proved accurate in this case.\textsuperscript{15} Consultation with archivists in Strathclyde University, Glasgow’s Mitchell Library and the National Archives, has failed to unearth minutes of Women’s Housing Association meetings which, it had been hoped, would provide information on women’s thoughts and plans. Co-operative societies existed in areas relevant to the strike and various minute books of the Kinning Park Co-operative Society are held in the Glasgow City Archive, but 1915 has not been preserved and those of Partick Co-operative Societies provide no female voice although the record does confirm food prices were rising steadily.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12}L. Leneman, \textit{A Guid Cause: The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Scotland} (Aberdeen, 1991)
\textsuperscript{13}Navickas, ‘Whatever happened to Class?’ pp. 200 -203.
\textsuperscript{15}Breitenbach, and Gordon, \textit{Out of Bounds}, p.7.
\textsuperscript{16}Glasgow City Archive (hereafter GCA) CW1/33/36 & CW1/33/54
Female rent strikers, including the leaders, were house-wives with little free time, facilities, or privacy to record their feelings and views. Planning strategies or organising future events took place in kitchens, wash-houses or back courts. Consequently research into their protest activities has been limited to official records of male institutions such as the Glasgow Council and contemporary newspapers accounts such as The Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette, The Govan Press unfortunately of a poor quality, and the Forward. The latter is not noted for objective reporting given its socialist sympathies but has been extensively used as it provides much material which is not available elsewhere in such detail. For example, the Forward records an incident in which a rent collector breaks open a child’s money box because his mother had no money for the rent, but this emotive material is not corroborated in other newspapers, so a degree of scepticism is necessary. First-hand accounts by major participants can be circumspect too. Frequently written long after the events in question; Gallacher having written his memoir thirty-six years after the strike, there is a danger of subsequent events influencing memory. Lacking female voices in the historical archive, photographs have proved useful to draw inferences from facial expressions, from language of placards and even the composition of the picture.

The information obtained from the sources detailed above, is set out in the three following chapters. Chapter one explains the background to the housing problem and gives a summary of the main events of the strike campaign to assist understanding of the society and the local environment in which the resistance behaviour took place. Chapter two focuses on how women protested, both collectively and individually, providing evidence that women were involved in all aspects and levels of the campaign and in so doing, furnishes numerous reasons why the rent strike can be labelled ‘a woman’s fight. This work also seeks to

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18 Forward 13.11.1915, p.8 c.4 & 5.
understand what drove women to indulge in uncharacteristic, defiant behaviour in an era of
male dominance. Chapter three, therefore explores the motivation of the female activist and
suggests possible sources of inspiration for the protest behaviour. It will also elucidate the
barriers and the supports under which house-wives functioned in war-torn, troubled Glasgow.

The current year, 2018, is the centenary of women first achieving the vote, television
documentaries, newspaper articles and even postage stamps are heightening the profile of
female suffragettes. This dissertation hopes, in a small way, to raise the profile of another
group of women – working-class Glasgow house-wives - who fought against the hegemony
of house-owners and who, in a few short months, and with the help of male industrial
workers, righted an injustice and achieved a major benefit not only for people in Glasgow but
for large numbers of working-class tenants throughout Britain and Ireland for many years to
come.
Chapter 1 Genesis and Synopsis of the Glasgow Rent Strike of 1915.

Background

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was civil unrest in many parts of the British Isles. Pressure for Home Rule was mounting in Ireland and Scotland, London and Liverpool experienced disruptive dock strikes, Dundee mill workers campaigned for better conditions, and, despite the Crofters’ Act of 1886, land agitation continued in the west of Scotland and the Hebrides.\(^{19}\) Glasgow was a troubled city with recent strikes by engineers and workers in the Red Turkey and Singer Sewing Machine factories.\(^{20}\) When Britain went to war with Germany in 1914 the country needed to dramatically increase wartime production so Glasgow, the epicentre of heavy engineering and shipbuilding, was extremely important, but traditionally wages were low. Prior to 1914, trade in these industries was cyclical and with frequent periods of unemployment, workers were reluctant to rent houses they could only afford in the good times and not in the bad times.

Low rents resulted in poor quality housing with little incentive for improvement due to low returns on investment and, crucially, no municipal housing existed in Britain in 1915. The peculiarities of the Scottish feu system exacerbated the situation. A property owner had to make sufficient profit not only to pay the interest on the mortgage - known in 1915 as a bond – but also to pay an annual fee to the feudal superior. To maximise investment returns, three or four-story tenement blocks became the normal accommodation for Glasgow’s working-classes as it maximised the number of homes per square mile. A common stair leading to perhaps ten homes sharing toilet and washing facilities, necessitated a communal life-style


which was to have important repercussions during the strike. Pacione’s study found, by 1914, “no fewer than 700,000 people resided within three square miles of Glasgow Cross and created the most densely populated, central urban area in Europe”.  

The Glasgow City Council – then called the Corporation - was aware of the housing problem and the question of municipal house building had been raised as early as 1903. Glasgow Labour councillors, led by John Wheatley, had campaigned, for ‘£8 cottages’ - decent accommodation which working-classes could afford – to be paid for using the Glasgow Tramways surplus. The campaign was unsuccessful as several councillors viewed the housing problem as affecting only the less-respectable working-classes living in slum areas. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the upper and middle-classes distinguished between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The social historian T.C. Smout, suggests Glasgow factors “placed the root of poor housing conditions as due to intemperance and thriftless”. (Some may say that little has changed in the twenty-first century).

With the war came the requirement for huge increases in production in shipyards, engineering workshops, and munitions factories, generating a massive influx of workers to Glasgow. As the norm was to live within walking distance of one’s workplace, areas such as Partick and Govan became extremely overcrowded becoming the most densely populated burgh in Scotland. Devine quotes 20,000 munitions workers alone came to Glasgow, in the first year of the war. The increased demand meant that even uninhabitable property was hastily repaired; the city council tried to argue accommodation was available but the council minutes

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23 J Wheatly, “£8 Cottages for Glasgow Citizens” pamphlet (Glasgow, 1913), pp.6-10.
24 Smout, A Century of the Scottish People p.51.
show very few vacancies even in slum areas. The outbreak of the war in 1914 escalated the housing problem into a housing crisis.

Glasgow house-owners, wanting to take the advantage of increasing demand for accommodation, sought to evict tenants in arrears. The Small Tenements Recovery Act gave Scottish house-owners the power of sequestration or summary eviction which Daunton claims was harshly applied in Scotland. In 1914 an Emergency Powers Act was passed ensuring cases were heard by special courts with powers to allow tenants a period of grace, in practice this meant only an extra week or just a few days as is evidenced in court reporting by the Forward. Statistics produced by Englander confirm the dramatic rise in evictions:

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At their conference in January 1915 the Glasgow house-owners saw an unfettered housing market as an opportunity to impose further rent increases, Mr Speirs, the President, stated “this was a time for raising rents” and urged members not to miss this opportunity. Given such a dearth of accommodation, falling into rent arrears had dire consequences and unrest began to take on a more militant form as Tenant Defence Associations called for the introduction of Fair Rent Courts. The following summary of the main events of the rent strike

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27 GCA Council Minutes C1.3.53, 26.07.1915, p. 1907.
29 Forward 21.11.1914. p.2, c. 5.
provides a sense of the chronology of the campaign and contextualises the women’s resistance actions before further discussion in chapter two.

Summary of the rent strike campaign.

Disquiet and grumblings became overt protests when women from the Govan area called a meeting on 16th February to oppose the “unpatriotic” actions of house-owners, at a time that women are called upon to make sacrifices”. The unrest spread to Greenock and Clydebank where Trades Councils and ward committees called for Fair Rent Courts. In May the Glasgow Women’s Housing Association (GWHA) organised a meeting to gain further support for their campaign and planned a huge protest parade on May Day to Glasgow Green, which the Forward estimated at 20,000. The outrage and anger generated when, in June, a serviceman’s dependents were threatened with eviction, fuelled further militant action and there were calls from some councillors and tenants associations for government intervention. The government did nothing to mitigate the housing unrest. they only intervened in the industrial arena; passing legislation to restrict workers’ rights. Over the summer agitation spread throughout the city and industrial militancy was fuelled by mounting bitterness at the introduction of The Munitions Act in July. This required men to obtain a ‘leaving certificate’ from their employer before they could change jobs and outlawed strike action, David Kirkwood, a trade union shop steward branded it as a ‘slave’s clause’ because it severely limited workers bargaining power. This was an important development, as

31 Melling, Rent Strikes, copy of poster, p. 63.
32 Ibid., p.61; Govan Press 05.03.1915, p.1, c.2 & 3.
33 Forward 08.05.1915, p.3, c.1 & 2 claims 20,000 marched but 50,000 gathered at Glasgow Green.
34 P. Summerfield ‘Women and War in the Twentieth Century’ in J. Purvis, Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945 (London, 1995 reprinted 2004), p. 309/310. She believes it was this outrage which triggered the strike, but others think it started earlier
35 Smyth Rents, Peace, Votes, p.178.
industrial grievances were now directed at the state not just the employers. The rent strikers were able to capitalise on this anger and incorporate this into their opposition to rents rises.

‘WE ARE NOT MOVING’ posters, appeared in hundreds of windows and civil disturbances became more common when officials appeared at tenement blocks.37 Many of the residents in the shipbuilding areas of Govan and Partick, signed ‘non-payment petitions’ agreeing to pay only the original rent not the extra demanded. By September, the strike had spread from Govan to Ibrox and is significant because Govan was a Catholic area while Ibrox was Protestant, suggesting that religion was not a dividing factor threatening strikers solidarity. Solidarity was an important feature of the movement, drawing support from many organisations such as the trades union council, tenants’ committees, the Socialist Labour Party and anti-war movements.

Sporadic demonstrations spread as house-owners continued to impose further increases, and women strike activists canvassed support in shipyard and munitions areas. When a women’s deputation to the council in October was accompanied by a huge crowd, it received national press coverage; the Govan Press describing the mood as exuberant.38 Eventually the government appointed a commission of inquiry headed by Lord Hunter to investigate the disturbances and both the government and the protestors called for factors to ‘stay their hand’ pending the findings of the commission.39

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37 W. Gallagher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, p.53; Crawfurd unpublished diary p.144
38 Manchester Guardian. 08.10.1915; Govan Press 08.10.1915, p.5, c. 3.
39 Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette 23.10.1915, p. 5 c.6; The inquiry sat for only three days in Glasgow and its findings were that there had been no widespread rent-racking in Glasgow; Govan Press 19.11.1915, p2 c.4-6.
These calls went unheeded and factors, having met effective opposition from women whom they expected would be easily intimidated, sought recourse to the law. Eighteen shipyard workers were summoned to the Small Debt Court on 17th October which had the power to arrest wages to recover rent arrears. Factors expected this would force the rent strikers to give in, but they did not! A large crowd of protestors accompanied the accused to court but were forced to remain outside. The sheriff procrastinated but after hearing a deputation from the defendants’ supporters followed by lengthy discussions with the lawyers and factor, the cases were dropped. The outcome was widely reported nationally even in the government supporting Times newspaper, with threats of similar strikes in Dundee and Aberdeen being reported by the Forward.\footnote{Forward 23.10.1915. p. 3 c.2}

In the highly charged atmosphere there was much jubilation, and the success generated resolve to escalate the protests.

Massive demonstrations were planned for November to spell out the demand for rents to be frozen at pre-war levels, Fair Rent Courts were no longer acceptable as the people had lost faith in the independence of the legal system.\footnote{Melling, Rent Strikes p. 98.} Faced with greater civil disturbances coupled with serious threats of massive industrial strikes and stoppages, the government was forced to intervene. Given the nation’s vulnerable situation; difficulties on the front-line, and an armaments’ scandal, the government could not risk an industrial dispute on the scale threatened as it had the potential to seriously disrupt the war effort. Hutchison’s claim that Glasgow was in pole position in shipbuilding can be challenged but its importance is undisputed.\footnote{I.G.C., Hutchison, ‘Workshop of the Empire: The Nineteenth Century’ in J. Wormald (ed), Scotland: A History World’ (Oxford, 2005), p. 212. Hutchison claims that by 1900 Glasgow’s production outstripped that of Germany and America combined.} A bill was quickly passed through parliament and, following a series of
amendments which had the effect of increasing the number of tenants who would benefit from this legislation, received Royal Assent in December 1915.\textsuperscript{43}

The rent strikers had triumphed. The result of their determined protests brought major benefit to large numbers of working-class tenants in all parts of the Britain and Ireland. Rent controls remained in place until 1989 as no government could disengage from a commitment on housing but, significantly, it had not solved the long-term housing problem in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{44}

The above is not intended as a complete record of events merely an overview. The part played by women in the development and progress of the campaign is explored in the following chapter to provide evidence that their direct action justifies applying the term ‘a woman’s fight’.

\textsuperscript{43} House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, pp. 229-340. Act is officially \textit{The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act 1915}.

\textsuperscript{44} House of Commons Library Ref. No. HL/PO/PU/1/1915/5&6 G5c97.
Chapter 2: Why ‘a woman’s fight’?

“This fight was going to be won by women.”

Chapter one provided an outline of the course of the rent strike campaign. This chapter explores events in which women were involved arguing that the degree of their participation at all levels in the campaign was so extensive that it can be described as a woman’s fight. The reasons for justification include, the attitude of the male dominated society in which the women functioned, the fact that women were at the forefront of the confrontations, that women protested in large numbers, that women’s behaviour changed from docility and acceptance to defiance and challenge, that women used initiative, displayed leadership qualities and finally, the current public perception of the 1915 rent strike is of a fight undertaken and led by women.

Protest behaviour comes in a variety of forms: petitions, threats, demonstrations, strikes, letters to officials/the press, defacement, withholding rent; what Carl Griffin terms a protestor’s tool-box. The women rent activists did not possess the whole pantheon of resistance actions due to gender limitation, but of those at their disposal, they used effectively and appropriately for the situation, as illustrated below. No attempt is made here to recount the whole story of the strike, the intention is to view the strike from a female perspective providing evidence to claim that ‘a woman’s fight’ is a reasonable description.

Societal attitudes

Although the Victorian attitude to women, summoned up in the phrase “Angel in the Home,” was becoming discredited, the early twentieth century still positioned women as wives and mothers, though this prevailing ideology differed from the reality. Working-class women

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45 M. Barbour, Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette, 23.10.1915 p5, c.6.
46 C. Griffin, 1 November 2016 UHI evening seminar.
had always worked, in mills, laundries, and, increasingly from 1914, in factories which is somewhat at odds with Eleanor Gordon’s claim that industrial capitalism had privatised the family.\textsuperscript{48} In 1915 the government called for women to volunteer for war-work, but gender-based prejudice remained; men were the fighters and women the home-makers with women expected to be docile and compliant.\textsuperscript{49} Penny Summerfield postulates that war required women to cross gender boundaries but those who did encountered this gender prejudice especially from Trade Union members worried over what came to be known as ‘dilution’.\textsuperscript{50} There remained prescribed gender behaviour with public spaces of commerce and politics viewed as male arenas while domesticity remained the preserve of women. Housing therefore was a female issue in 1915.

Speaking in Paisley in 1915, Councillor Russell complained that men were more interested in football and horse-racing than participating in rent protests.\textsuperscript{51} Reid’s opinion, that men were apathetic towards rent levels because it was a domestic issue appears to be true in the case of Thomas Cairns Livingston a Glasgow tenant who kept a daily diary in 1915. On the 26\textsuperscript{th} January he wrote, “\textit{Got a note from the factor putting up the rent by a pound in a year. The bleeding ‘Hun’, the flaming blighter’}.\textsuperscript{52} But throughout the year he makes no mention of protest marches or attending any meetings, though he comments on women taking over men’s jobs on the tramway. His only other reference to rent, in the whole of 1915, is his entry of 21\textsuperscript{st} October stating “\textit{We got a note from the factor increasing the rent by 2/- in the quarter ‘Strafe’ the factor’}.\textsuperscript{53} It is clear that Thomas did not see the rent struggle as his fight.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{50} Summerfield, ‘Women and War in the Twentieth Century’, p. 308. \\
\textsuperscript{52} T.C. Livingston, unpublished diary entry 26/01/1915 GCA. TD 1969/3. \\
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. diary 30.03.1915 & 29.07.1915.
\end{flushright}
Interestingly this is the earliest example discovered of linking property owners with the German enemy.\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{Women were at the forefront of the struggle}

Housing was an issue which was fundamental to women affecting every aspect of their daily lives. When Glasgow house-owners at their conference in January 1915, decided to increase rents in working-class areas, women were the most negatively affected and were the first to face the problem.\textsuperscript{55} Although the male occupant was the legal tenant, his name being on the tenancy agreement, finding the money to pay the rent was the responsibility of the woman.\textsuperscript{56} Women managed the household budget, it was their job to make ends meet: not an easy task with the limited incomes of Glasgow’s low-waged economy of 1915. June Hannam comments on how essential it was for women to be good at managing their meagre budgets, how they had to be resourceful in the daily grind of providing for their families, and they had to be good organisers; experience which was to stand them in good stead during the strike.\textsuperscript{57} Smyth postulates that women went to enormous ends to provide for their families; the degree of organisation, self-discipline and the practical budgeting skills which ordinary house-wives possessed he believes, was little recognised at the time but these skills proved valuable in the rent struggle.\textsuperscript{58}

Glasgow Council minutes provide evidence of the pressures on family budgets exacerbated by German submarine blockade; the government exhorted women to be ‘patriotic’ in their purchases (the language of patriotism was to prove a weapon for the women activists). In

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Ibid. The use of the word ‘Huns’ suggests that this term was in common parlance prior to the rent strike. It was subsequently used by the strikers to deliberately link the housing grievances with popular feelings against the foreign enemy.
\item[55] Forward 20/02/1915 and 23/02/1915.
\item[58] Smyth, \textit{Rents, Peace Votes}, p. 205.
\end{footnotes}
April and May, Councillor Dollan, requested the council petition the government to “take over control of the supply and distribution of coal” to prevent coal-owner profiteering, but without success.\textsuperscript{59} Iain Robertson and John Bohstedt contend that historically, women often initiated protests, mainly food riots, because they were the people most aware of the increasing prices.\textsuperscript{60} Similar parallels are shown here when the proposed rent increases, added more economic pressures to stretched family budgets and became a catalyst for resistance actions.

This occurred when Mrs McHugh, a soldiers’ wife with rent arrears of £1, was summoned to court to defend an eviction notice.\textsuperscript{61} Mr McHugh was in a hospital in Rouen so could not attend court. Being evicted could be catastrophic as alternative accommodation was virtually unavailable.\textsuperscript{62} On hearing of this case, 500 women immediately volunteered as pickets such was their anger at the treatment of their neighbours, many responding to Wheatley exhortations quoted in the introduction.\textsuperscript{63} On the day of the intended eviction a large crowd of women gathered at the tenement and prevented the notice being served. Another group paraded to the factor’s house where they burnt his effigy but on hearing from the police that the factor was ill they immediately withdrew. Later that evening windows in the factor’s house were broken, the composition of the crowd is unknown, but it was a man who was sentenced to 30 days or a £5 fine for breaking the windows.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{59} Glasgow City Archive (hereafter GCA) C1.53 Glasgow Council Minutes 1915. Numerous entries including 29.04.1915, p.1337, 20.05.1915. p. 1504, 23.08.1915. They were still bringing up the subject of coal prices in November 1915.


\textsuperscript{61} Forward 12.06.1915 p.4, c.5 & 6.

\textsuperscript{62} Forward 23.10.1915, p. 8 c. 3 & 4 carried and article on huts on the open spaces for evicted tenants. [The Forward also carried an article on the attempted suicide of a woman made homeless, but no corroboration of this event has been found]

\textsuperscript{63} Forward 19.06.1915 p.1 c.5 & 6.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid 19.06.1915.
Women protestors devised clever strategies to protect tenants threatened with eviction which were vividly described in the Forward newspaper and corroborated by Helen Crawfurd in her diary. Their tactics skilfully exploited the design of Glasgow tenements where one entrance, or ‘close’ was the only access to perhaps as many as ten homes. If known in advance, the close was packed with protestors to secure the tenement. In order to guard against unexpected arrivals of officials, one person was posted in the ‘close’ to warn of trouble and, as soon as an official approached, the look-out raised the alarm using a drum, a football rattle, a bell, anything which would make sufficient noise to alert the house-wives in that and other tenements in the street. Women came running with bags of flour, whiting, rotten fruit, and even wet washing, whatever was to hand, and pelted the unhappy official chasing him out the close and frequently all the way down the street. As Robertson has stated “Space Matters” in relation to protest. The strike transformed the close from an access to dwellings, into the frontline of the fight. This strategy allowed women to carry on with their housework yet still be actively involved in the campaign. Commenting on women’s action on the front-line of protest activity, Councillor Russell stated, “It was the women who had to stay in their homes and face the factors…once they were organised they were the very devil”. The rent collector, factor’s clerk, or sheriff officer trying to serve notices were

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66 Ibid, pp 144-146.
67 Robertson, Landscapes of Protest, p.196.
68 Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette 23.10.1915, p.5 c.6.
confronted by angry house-wives. Humiliation of authority figures became a common strategy well publicised in local papers and, by late October, few sheriff officers were prepared to run the gauntlet of angry women.\textsuperscript{69} In his researches on protest actions, J.C. Scott found a typical devise used by those in inferior positions was to humiliate those of superior status.\textsuperscript{70} Landlords expected women to meekly accept rent increases, but they did not, and, being at the forefront of the disturbances, Michael Lynch described them as “the ‘shock troops’ of the campaign” because of the spirited resolute way in which they dealt with officialdom.\textsuperscript{71}

Many men were unable to be alongside their wives confronting officials. At the outbreak of war women saw their male relations rush to respond to the famous Kitchener poster.\textsuperscript{72} Glaswegians made a huge contribution to the voluntary armies of the Great War, journalist J.M. Reid writing of “…. battalions of clerks…students, tramway men…..”.\textsuperscript{73} A serviceman, driver Johnstone, did his best to support his wife; he wrote from “Somewhere in France” asking for his letter to be published in the Evening Standard but it was the Forward which printed the letter in full, detailing how Mrs Johnstone and her one-year old child were evicted because she could not pay a month’s advance rent.\textsuperscript{74}

Working-men not in the armed services, were engaged in their own industrial battles which took up a considerable amount of their time and energy as they fought for shorter hours, higher wages, and better working conditions. In July, when legislation negated Trade Union

\textsuperscript{69} Forward 30.10.1915.
\textsuperscript{72} Pugh, \textit{Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{73} J.M. Reid. Glasgow, (London,1956), p. 156. Reid was an assistant editor of the Glasgow Herald and editor of the Bulletin for twelve years.
\textsuperscript{74} Forward, 29.05.1915 p. 8 c.6. With effect from March 1915, the Soldiers and Sailors Association had ceased to be responsible for servicemen’s rent. Up till this point the government saw women as dependents of the male breadwinner hence paid allowance to wives when this ceased, Mrs Johnstone was required to pay a month’s rent in advance, but she could only afford the weekly payment.
bargaining power, women activist connected this industrial resentment with housing grievances to great effect.

_Widespread engagement in protest action by women_

Thousands of women joined in the protest movement. Prior to 1915 women had begun to be politically active, calling for improvements to Glasgow tenements but they had little political power. With no vote, no female representatives in parliament, no local councillors, women had no direct access to the institutional channels available to their male counterparts. They regularly packed the public gallery of the city council to ensure they were well-informed and able to react quickly to things they disagreed with.\(^{75}\) For example, the GWHA submitted a letter objecting to the Govanhill ward committee’s proposals for housing in Govanhill because these proposals had not been approved by the electors thus demonstrating female belief in democracy.\(^{76}\) Neither did women leave it to men to resist the hegemony of the landlords, they saw it as their fight and engaged in the struggle in large numbers in whatever capacity they could. As Helen Crawfurd stated, “This struggle brought great masses of women together.”\(^{77}\) The GWHA organised a “MEETING of WOMEN” in the Morris Hall on 16\(^{th}\) February deliberately aiming to involve more women in the fight, as is clear from the wording on the hand-bill and the start time of 3pm.\(^{78}\) In May another GWHA meeting, in the Cressy Hall, was where according to the Forward, women “declared war against the rent rises and planned a campaign of action”; the Govan Press gave a less sensationalist account detailing the motions presented by Mrs Hill, Spiers and Clark.\(^{79}\) Mary Barbour the forceful, charismatic leader of the South Govan Women’s Housing association (SGWHA) encouraged other areas to establish tenant committees and Govan and Partick areas became known for

\(^{75}\) *Forward*, 27.02.1915, p.3, c.5.
\(^{76}\) GCA Council Minutes 17.96.1915, pp. 1718-1721.
\(^{77}\) Crawfurd diary p. 147.
\(^{78}\) Melling, *Rent Strikes*, copy of handbill p.63.
\(^{79}\) *Forward* 05.06.1915 p.1 c. 5.; *Govan Press* 28.05.1915, p5, c. 3.
their militancy. The first tenants to sign petitions agreeing to refuse to pay the extra rent demanded, were in Kinning Park in Govan and is perhaps why Helen Corr and J.J. Smyth agree the strike was initiated by women tenants of Kinning Park. The Forward reported that, of the 264 tenants, 250 had agreed to sign, while the Govan Press quoted a higher figure of 260. Women were good at personal contact, persuading others in their tenements to join the protest. Melling contends that face-to-face contact was the main reason for many tenants signing non-payment petitions. Efficient female communications networks were also instrumental in mobilizing large crowds of supporters. This reinforces Bohstedt argument that crowds are mobilised from existing networks and he also postulates that it is easier to get people to participate if there is a tangible objective, which there was here, rather than “futile dreams of revolution”. On May Day a procession of 25,000 people marched to Glasgow Green where the numbers swelled to 50,000 according to the Forward.

The GWHA continued the campaign over the summer with support spreading from Partick and Govan to the Protestant area of Ibrox where, according to Melling, it outstripped that in Catholic Govan by September; Melling claims 25,000 tenants were on strike by October. The scale of the protests began attracting national press coverage. The Manchester Guardian, and the Times, reported Birmingham tenants were threatening to copy Glasgow. The Manchester Guardian also reported a deputation to the City Chambers was “accompanied by about 1,500 people, mostly women…” carrying banners displaying “Our Husbands …are fighting the Prussians of Germany. We are fighting the Prussians of Partick.”

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82 Melling, Rent Strikes, p. 64.
83 Bohstedt, Riots and Community, pp. 23 & 222/3.
84 Forward 08.05.1915, p.3, c. 1 & 2.
85 Melling, Rent Strikes, p. 70 and 107.
86 Manchester Guardian, 30.09.1915; The Times, 09.07.1915. issue 40928, p.3 The Times Digital Archive
87 Manchester Guardian, 08.10.1915, (accessed via ProQuest 30 August 2017); Glasgow Herald 08.10.1915, p. 8, c. 4.
to avoid the condemnation suffragettes had attracted, women strove to ensure respectability and discipline in their marches. Protestors were encouraged to attend in their ‘Sunday Best’ clothes, as is evident in the photograph. The Glasgow Herald commented that marchers were orderly quiet and well-dressed.\textsuperscript{88} Brotherstone believes protestors did not want to appear rebellious.\textsuperscript{89} Respectability was important too for their ‘tea picket’ tactics. Women set up a table at a tenement entrance and sat having tea; anyone wishing to pass had to satisfy the women that they posed no threat.\textsuperscript{90} This photograph is of a tea picket at the entrance to a close in Thornwood Avenue which was strategically chosen near a major shipbuilder, Fairfields, to reinforce the message of common grievances.

\textsuperscript{88} Glasgow Herald 08.10.1915, p. 8 c.1 & 2.
\textsuperscript{89} Brotherstone p. 93/4; Paisley &Renfrewshire Gazette 23.10.1915 p4 c.2 &3.
\textsuperscript{90} D. Tait, \textit{Glasgow in the Great War: Your Towns and Cities in the Great War}, (Glasgow, 2016), p. 54. Courtesy of GCA.
Women challenged authority

Resistance was not confined to collective action. Individual women, such as Mary Barbour, often took the initiative in difficult situations for example, when a sheriff officer tried to serve an eviction notice on an ill widow, bags of peasemeal and flour were thrown at him by angry housewives one of whom was arrested. Mary quietly spoke to the official eventually persuading him to leave and the police to release the one woman who had been arrested.91 When a hard-line factor began intimidating women, tricking one into paying the increase convincing her that others had done so, Mary persuaded several shipyard workers in their overalls to go with her to the factor’s office where they successful recovered the tenant’s money.

Traditionally viewed as quiescent and easily intimidated women’s behaviour became forceful and resolute as is evident when Mrs Barbour and Mrs Ferguson confronted Neilson & Sons factors in the Govan and Partick areas. The factors had threatened tenants with eviction proceedings because they needed to acquire 100-150 dwellings for Harland and Wolff for their incoming shipyard workers, but the women immediately wrote to the Managing Director questioning the truth of Neilson’s claim. He replied, strongly denying any knowledge of this and expressing company support for the striking tenants. His letter was printed in full in the Forward.92

Another example occurred in August when five women obtained an interview again with Neilson & Sons to discuss the position of striking tenants at 733 and 735 Dumbarton Road. The factor tried to justify the increased rents because men were receiving “big wages” which the women countered by stating that servicemen’s wives had no increase in their income. The factor remained unmoved and refused to accept any amount less than the total demanded,

91 Melling Rent Strikes pp. 81-82
92 Forward 05.06.1915 p.1 c. 5
warning his expenses would be added, presumably the cost of taking out a summons, if the full amount was not forthcoming.\textsuperscript{93} One of the women pointed out that he had accepted “…\textit{without demur}…” the basic rent on houses for which Harland & Wolff were responsible illustrating a different attitude to those in power compared to those normally compliant. \textsuperscript{94}

This increasing civil unrest caused concern among the authorities both local and national. The Glasgow Council eventually agreed to hear a tenant’s deputation, on 7\textsuperscript{th} October which had been requested by women protestors in July.\textsuperscript{95} The Glasgow Herald printed a lengthy report on the meeting recording Mrs Nixon words that “…there was only one channel through which the house-owners could get thus increase in rent and that was by the semi-starvation of the women and children” The deputation received national coverage with the Glasgow Herald and the Bulletin printing photographs of the crowd of supporters outside holding placards bearing inflammatory slogans.\textsuperscript{96}

\textit{The strike is remembered today as a woman’s fight led by women.}

Despite the scale of female organisation, men assumed the political leadership – Srebnik identified similar tendencies in London strikes - there is little doubt that Mary Barbour is viewed as the leader of the direct-action protests carried out by the tenants.\textsuperscript{97} The National Museum of Scotland, the Mitchell Library and the Peoples’ Palace Museum, all display portraits of her as the strike leader. She was able to inspire many followers and galvanised great support prompting Gallacher’s description “…a typical working-class house-wife, [she] became the leader of a movement such as had never been seen before… Mrs Barbour

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\item \textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 28.08.1915 p.8 c.4 \& 5; Glasgow Herald 28.08.1915, p.8 c.5 \& 6
\item \textsuperscript{94} Forward,28.08.1915, p8. c.4 \& 5
\item \textsuperscript{95} Glasgow Council Minutes, C1 3.53, p.2474, 7.10.1915
\item \textsuperscript{96} Glasgow Herald, 08.10.1915 p.3 c.2-6
\item \textsuperscript{97} For example, Hughes, \textit{Gender and Political Identities in Scotland} p 41; Gallacher, \textit{Revolt on the Clyde}, p52; H. Srebnik, ‘Class, Ethnicity and Gender Intertwined: Jewish women and the East London Rent Strikes, 1935-1940’, Women’s History Review, Vol. 4 No. 3 (1995), p. 284.
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and her army of women…” \(^{98}\) Mary’s leadership was so valued she was presented with a pocket-watch inscribed “in recognition of her services during the rent strike. \(^{99}\) Poems and folk songs have been written about her exploits, two of which are included in the appendices. A statue commemorating Mary and her army of followers was erected outside the Govan underground station on International Women’s Day 2018.

![Statue of Mary Barbour and followers. Author’s image](image1)

The National newspaper reported crowds of schoolchildren and politicians at the launch. \(^{100}\) Corr believes that women provided effective leadership and crucially they harnessed great support for the campaign by establishing alliances with other groups such as the trades council the anti-war movement. \(^{101}\) This is a convincing argument as female activists were members of several organisations and adept at using what today might be termed ‘soft-power’. One of the great strengths of female protest activity was their ability to enlist and maintain support from other organisations. Many women, Mary Barbour, Helen Crawfurd, Mrs Laird, Mary MacArthur, belonged to autonomous organisations such as the Women’s

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\(^{98}\) Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, p. 52/53.

\(^{99}\) Watch is held in the Fairfield Heritage Centre in Govan a copy of the watch is in the People’s Palace Museum.

\(^{100}\) National, 09.03.2018, pp.14 & 15 (personal copy)

\(^{101}\) Corr Introduction in Melling, *Rent Strikes*, p vii and x
Labour League, The Co-operative Women’s Guild, the Women’s Peace Crusade and therefore were able to generate connections between housing struggles and other grievances.

Cooperation between men and women

Women worked alongside men in the struggle against rising rents uniting several disparate groups. Women were aware that they lacked industrial muscle; making up only a small percentage of the workforce, withdrawing their labour would impact but never cripple any industry. They needed the support of male workers, so they deliberately linked the rent strike to industrial grievances, for example their tea pickets were conspicuously held in areas where tenants were shipyard workers. Connecting housing grievances with industrial ones is what gave the campaign its bargaining power. It is reasonable to infer that women were instrumental in achieving these alliances especially because of the women’s experience in the co-operative branches, whose ethos was one of co-operation and mutual support. Other movements of the period suffered from internal divisions; Crawfurd disapproved of the conflict between the SLP and the ILP while Cooper asserts there was personal antagonism between John Maclean’s marxists and shop stewards Gallacher and Kirkwood.¹⁰²

The GWHA helped the GLPHA to organise work-gate and dinner-hour meetings at the shipyards and munitions factories. In August the meetings included ones at Harland & Wolff at 1.30pm, Shield Hall at 2.30pm and Fairfield at 1.30.¹⁰³ These meetings raised funds to defend court actions taken out against striking tenants and they capitalised on the workingmen’s anger at the legislation described earlier.¹⁰⁴ Munitions workers accompanied a woman’s deputation to the council where they acknowledged “the calamity of stoppage of labour but, as a last resort, men would take the risk rather than see wives and children…be

¹⁰³ Forward, 28.08.1915 p.8 c.4.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., Forward 28.08.1915 p.8 c.4.
put on the street by the rapacity of house-owners.”\textsuperscript{105} The government feared a potential revolution in Glasgow and decided it would intervene. Governmental procrastination was pre-empted, however, by further direct action. When eighteen male rent strikers were summoned to appear in court on 17\textsuperscript{th} November, the GWHA organised a huge protest meeting which thousands attended and heard powerful speeches including one by Helen Crawfurd; according to the Forward “the women were magnificent”.\textsuperscript{106} Huge crowds accompanied the accused to court where, after much delay, the cases were dropped. This court success boosted morale and a massive demonstration was planned to ramp up the pressure. The government capitulated and agreed to the strikers’ demands, namely rents frozen at pre-war levels. Women had fought a determined campaign and were deservedly rewarded with success.

The above is not a comprehensive list of all the protest activities women undertook. These examples have been included as typical of the women’s protests and are used here to justify the description of the struggle against rent rises as a ‘woman’s fight’. The restrictions under which female activists functioned should not be ignored, however, nor should the mechanisms which supported them in their struggle. These will be considered in the following chapter along with interpretations of the key factors driving female protest behaviour.

\textsuperscript{105} Glasgow Herald, 08.10.1915, p. 8, c.4.
\textsuperscript{106} Forward.13.11.1915. p. 8, c. 4 & 5
Chapter 3: Female motivation and the impact of gender issues.

Chapter two focussed on female protest activity but it is considered important not just to describe female protest behaviour but also to try and discern what drove women to mobilize in large numbers and have the courage to change traditional compliant behaviour into defiance of authority. This chapter considers the limitations under which women functioned and discusses what they could rely on to support them through difficult events. It suggests what may have provided inspiration and encouragement, thereby obtaining insight into the women’s motivation to instigate withholding rent and to maintain their resolve though the long months of struggle in 1915. Whether these were the same for male activists will also be discussed briefly.

Disadvantages

Unlike their male counterparts, women had no access to institution means of protesting, they had no vote, no female representatives in parliament, and no local female councillors; their political power was minimal. Glasgow, in the early twentieth century had a masculine character with heavy engineering and shipbuilding being the pre-dominant industries. Annemarie Hughes postulates that, somewhat unexpectedly, the Glasgow ILP was more progressive than other urban areas in its attitude to women. The Glasgow Labour Party had established a Housing Association in 1903 but no women held high office or great influence and this was why, according to Joseph Melling, Mary Barbour and Andrew McBride decided to establish the Glasgow Women’s Housing Association to press more forcibly for better housing conditions. The large number of local branches of housing associations were crucial in generating support for strike activity.

107 Hughes, Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, p.41.
108 Melling, Rent Strikes, p. 32 & 33.
Smyth claims that women lacked confidence to speak at meetings and in public, preferring to discuss future tactics in the security of their own homes unintimidated by men, and he cites Patrick Dollan saying it was unseemly for women to speak on public platforms.\textsuperscript{109} However, these views can be challenged. In his history of Kinning Park Co-operative Society, Dollan himself writes of women making speeches at their public meetings.\textsuperscript{110} Women activists did find sufficient courage to speak in public; the Glasgow Herald records women speakers at the deputation to the council and Harry McShane praised Agnus Dollan as a good speaker while Helen Crawfurd, was renowned for her powerful rhetoric in the suffragette campaign and which she continued to use in support of the rent strike.\textsuperscript{111}

Even the avenues ostensibly open to women presented difficulties. Extensive study of 1915 Glasgow and district newspapers suggests that writing articles and letters to the press was the preserve of the male rent protestors.\textsuperscript{112} The practical difficulties women experienced regarding writing down their views were significant. Many lived in cramped conditions where one room was the only space for cooking, eating, washing, sewing, and where children played and slept. Privacy was at a premium and not conducive to careful writing for publication. There were unseen barriers too for female activists. Housework in the early twentieth century was extremely labour intensive and required long hours of hard physical work. Gordon Corr describes it as sheer drudgery.\textsuperscript{113} In the dirt and grime of industrial Glasgow, washing, cleaning, and cooking absorbed huge amounts of time leaving little energy for political campaigning. Devoting some of this precious leisure time to fighting

\textsuperscript{109} Smyth \textit{Rents, Peace, Votes}, also cites a pamphlet written by Dollan p. 184.
\textsuperscript{110} P., Dollan, \textit{Jubilee History of Kinning Park Co-operative Society}, p. 148.
\textsuperscript{112} Forward, numerous articles examples on 23\textsuperscript{rd} Jan. 27\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 22\textsuperscript{nd} May, 5\textsuperscript{th} June, 10\textsuperscript{th} July, 7\textsuperscript{th} Aug., 18\textsuperscript{th} Sep., 16 Oct., 3\textsuperscript{0th} Oct.
\textsuperscript{113} Corr 'Introduction' in Melling, \textit{Rent Strikes}, pviii
against rent rises demonstrates a high degree of commitment, is impressive and deserves greater recognition.

Appreciative of the limited budget at the disposal of working-class women, female political groups charged only small subscriptions to encourage membership, consequently their resources for campaigning were low and they needed to access the resources of sympathetic male political parties. Meetings were held under the auspices of the Glasgow Labour Party Housing Committee (GLPHC) to gain their resources for printing notices advertising events. In trying to achieve their objectives, women were forced to employ whatever leverage they could muster. In studying inferior/superior relationships, Scott uses the term ‘weapons of the weak’ to describe covert activity.\textsuperscript{114} Though not directly applicable, it nevertheless appears an appropriate description of female protest activity during the 1915 strike. Perhaps ‘soft power’ is the way to describe how women had to argue, cajole, pressurise, or persuade men to act. For example, there were no women newspaper editors, so they could only request a sympathetic reporting of their marches or demonstrations and they relied on men to write articles for publication.

By 1915 women were beginning to have some influence in the labour market but only through the creation of their own independent organisations such as the Women’s Labour League but they lacked industrial muscle. Making up such a small percentage of the workforce, women withdrawing their labour would little impact. Fully aware of this weakness, the female activists realised they had to gain the support of male workers. The previous chapter detailed some of the work carried out by both men and women and several historians attribute

the solidarity of the campaign to the influence of women activists which ultimately led to success.

Supports

Smyth argues convincingly that much of the campaign’s effectiveness was due to female characteristics which he lists as, their co-operative nature, their willingness to share burdens, their determination to protect their families and their being prepared to allow men the greater visible role.115 These were indeed important, but perhaps the most significant for women strikers was their strong communal support networks revolving round the tenement, the street, and the parish. Women helped each other economically, morally and health-wise. In 1915 diseases such as TB were common, child-birth was hazardous and in difficult times friends and neighbours were crucial to survival. These strong bonds forged in adversity were crucial in maintaining the rent strike, as is amply evidenced during confrontations with factors and sheriff officers and in the McHugh case.

Membership of Co-operative Guilds not only fostered friendships and provided valuable experience in organising large numbers of people and running campaigns. It created ‘safe spaces’ for learning the art of persuasion or drafting pithy slogans and producing eye-catching banners. Both Melling and Smyth champion the Guilds as being influential in developing self-confidence in women. Daily contact with neighbours ensured the rapid dissemination of information and these efficient communication networks played a significant role in bringing out crowds of supporters when marches were planned. Great speeches have little influence if only a few people turn up to hear them. Describing women’s role in the rent strike, McShane claimed “women’s activity [was] largely confined to the social side of things” but he also praised female organising skills… “the 1915 rent strike

…showed just how much women could do”.\textsuperscript{116} While this was indeed an area of female involvement, chapter two has demonstrated that female protest activity encompassed a far wider range of activities than social ones. Perhaps the greatest, most important attribute women brought to the movement was their ability to establish and maintain the support of various disparate groups of people.

\textit{Motivation and Inspiration}

All protest entails a degree of risk and, in with-holding the additional rent, women risked losing their homes. With many men absent on war service, fighting against rapacious landlords fell to the women; a situation extremely similar to the troubles in Skye in 1882. When messenger-at-arms arrived at Braes in September, James Hunter writes “since the menfolk were away at east coast herring fishing, the defence of the townships devolved upon their wives and daughters”.\textsuperscript{117} The female instinct to defend homes and families is strong and in 1915 was augmented by Glasgow house-wives desire to support neighbours in trouble. Community solidarity is evident in the well-publicised McHugh incident referred to above where shared values engendered by the close communal living, were the strong drivers to resist officialdom.

What people believe is hugely important as it confers ‘emotional energy’ and strengthens resolve to act.\textsuperscript{118} In studying female resistance behaviour, Murdie and Pekins found that women overtly protest when faced with any of the following: economic hardship, gender, ethnic or racial discrimination, and when aspirations are stifled. They also found that a belief in a positive outcome was essential.\textsuperscript{119} At least two of these requirements were in existence in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} McShane, \textit{No Mean Fighter}, p 35.
\item \textsuperscript{117} J. Hunter, \textit{The Making of the Crofting Community} (Edinburgh, 1976), p.139.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Robertson. Highland land Wars module UHI 2016.
\end{itemize}
1915. Small successes encourage further actions. Being able to prevent officials gaining access to tenants threatened with eviction was a successful tactic and no doubt increased protesters resolve. The photograph above suggests women happy to have achieved a positive outcome preventing the glum looking bowler hatted official from carrying out his duty.\(^{120}\)

Lacking direct evidence of women’s own thoughts, it is impossible to state categorically what drove women to protest, but insight into the female psyche can be gained by studying the language they used on placards and banners. These make frequent reference to the unpatriotic behaviour of landlords at a time when working people were making huge sacrifices. Landlords were likened to the German ‘Hun’, typical examples being: “My father is fighting in France, we are fighting the Huns at home” and “Our husbands, sons, and brothers are fighting the Prussians of Germany. We are fighting the Prussians of Partick.”\(^{121}\) War had removed the normal controls on the housing market and landlord’s unpatriotic behaviour gave women the legitimacy to resist their hegemony. This defiant behaviour complies with Navickas’s theory that overt protest occurs when the accepted rules of a community are broken.\(^{122}\) Feelings of being treated unfairly were created because the government had

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\(^{121}\) Melling, *Rent Strikes*, p. 84 &85 and Manchester Guardian. 08.10.1915.

intervened to protect business-men from war debts but had done nothing to protect tenants from rapacious landlords.\textsuperscript{123} The quest for justice was passionately stated by Helen Crawfurd speaking at a large demonstration on 13\textsuperscript{th} November, “All who were taking part in the demonstration were showing their solidarity. They were asking not for money, not for charity; they were asking for justice…” \textsuperscript{124}

It is reasonable to speculate that another source of injustice driving the resistance behaviour was The Munitions Act which compelled men to work long hours. However, workers would gain no benefit from their increased income if it was needed to pay the extra rent, and, in addition, not all tenants were industrial workers. This unfairness is implied when women challenged the factor, Neilson & Sons, stating that he was “bleeding the women and starving the children of servicemen” when he tried to justify increasing the rent because men were earning “big money”.\textsuperscript{125}

To risk taking part in public protest requires belief that it is possible to bring about a change. In his book Carl Griffin writes of the importance of collective memory in influencing and/or instigating protest activity.\textsuperscript{126} Collective memory enabled women to draw their inspiration from previous events, to challenge authority when their normal behaviour tended towards compliance and respect for authority. For example, rent strikes surfaced during land struggles in Ireland in the nineteenth century and were also widely employed to good effect by crofters in the later Highland Land Wars, as is well-documented in the extensive literature on the subject.\textsuperscript{127} Large numbers of Irishmen, had moved from Belfast to work in the Glasgow shipyards and had brought knowledge of Irish rent strikes. Similarly, large numbers of Highland men and women migrated to Glasgow in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{124} Crawfurd cited in Melling, \textit{Rent Strikes}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{125} Forward, 28.08.1915, p.8, c.4 & 5.
\textsuperscript{126} C.J. Griffin, \textit{Protest, Politics and Work in Rural England, 1700-1850} (Basingstoke, 2014)
\textsuperscript{127} Authors include. Cameron, J. Hunter, A Macinnes, E. Richards.
men to work in the police and the docks, women in domestic service.\textsuperscript{128} The Partick area of Glasgow – a militant area during the 1915 agitation - housed a significant number of Highlanders or people of Highland descent, it is extremely likely that female activists were aware of the events of the Highland Land Wars, especially as they had been extensively reported in Glasgow newspapers. The Crofters Act 1886 had been passed a mere twenty-nine years previously and was well within living memory. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that women activists in Glasgow in 1915 were influenced by the knowledge of what ordinary crofters had achieved, most especially the government’s intervention to limit proprietal rights following their civil unrest and disturbances.

The female tactics of pelting flour bombs at officials trying to serve notices on tenants, bear striking resemblance to women hurling clods of earth and dung at officials during the Highland Land Wars and suggests that Glasgow women in 1915 were specifically inspired by female Highlanders.\textsuperscript{129} In protest speeches John Maclean referred to the affect Clearances had on his family and also the Forward published an article stating there would be no repeat of the Clearances trick this time.\textsuperscript{130} Describing events in Skye in 1885, Hunter wrote “It was impossible to get officers to serve writs”; while Dollan wrote in the Forward “sheriff officers have no intention of undergoing a pease-meal bombardment” the comparison is impossible to ignore.\textsuperscript{131} Women had more recent role models, however, namely the suffragettes. Leah Leneman has shown in her book “A Guid Cause” that there was considerable Scottish working-class involvement in the suffrage movement. Possibly because violent action had

\textsuperscript{128} Current author’s family knowledge from relations who had lived in Glendale and other parts of Skye.
\textsuperscript{131} Hunter, The Making of the Crofting Community, p.152; Forward 30.10.1915.
drawn much criticism of the suffrage movement, the female rent activists placed considerable weight on respectability.

It is possible to surmise that any male activists had the same reasons and motivation for their resisting landlord hegemony, but there is evidence to suggest additional male motivations. For example, Gallagher and Maclean, saw the struggle as a class conflict, Kirkwood as improving Trade Union power, Wheatley as furthering his case for municipal housing while Dollan and McBride sought to harness the energy of the campaign to increase the standing of the ILP. It is clear from numerous articles in the Forward that Dollan had Labour Party objectives. Though some of the female leaders subsequently had successful careers in local politics it is generally accepted this was due to their experiences during the rent strike rather than political ambition at the outset.

Before embarking on an action, a protestor must have the belief in the possibility of effecting a change. The large-scale participation of women in the rent strike, implies they did believe their forceful resistance would produce a positive outcome. This and previous chapters have provided many examples of women bravely fighting against what they believed was an injustice, and for the common good of the community. It is testimony to their courage and commitment that they achieved a significant victory in Glasgow, not just for themselves but for working-class tenants throughout Scotland, the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland.
Conclusion

“the most successful example of direct action ever undertaken by the Scottish working-class.”

Local councillor and activist Patrick Dollan attributed the success of the rent strike to “the fine stand made by the tenants especially the women.” Despite Dollan’s praise, women’s role in protest activity has been underplayed in the historiography. The focus has been on anti-war ideology, social unrest and industrial militancy on Clydeside during the early twentieth century and a masculine narrative dominates. Through research in newspapers, council minutes and photographs, this study has found evidence of widespread female involvement in protests against rent increases, and thus argues that the struggle against rising rent levels was a woman’s fight.

Glasgow’s housing crisis stemmed from poor quality housing in working-class areas with high population density and was exacerbated by a huge influx of munitions workers brought in to increase war-time production. The war removed the traditional controls on the housing market which house-owners saw as an opportunity to raise rents. Collectively, landlords abdicated responsibility for the welfare of their tenants. Resistance to landlord profiteering surfaced first in the Govan area with tenants refusing to pay the extra demanded. Protests gradually spread to most working-class districts of Glasgow. Male members of trade unions and ward committees wrote letters of complaint to newspapers and the council, and, although some councillors wanted to petition the government to establish Fair Rent Courts, little was achieved.

Institutional channels of protests were unavailable to women due to their gender. Housewives, traditionally seen as responsible for paying domestic bills, were the most directly affected and soon took direct action. Though it is unlikely they were aware of Bohstedt’s

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133 Forward 16.10.1915, p. 4 c. 5.
theory that petitions can be easily ignored and concessions only won by overt practical action, perhaps they considered deeds more important than words.\textsuperscript{134} Women barricaded tenement closes to prevent evictions, humiliating, and chasing off officials. This tactic was particularly effective and achieved several objectives. It enabled women to be active and influential in the fight while still able to continue their daily chores; it prevented notices being served; it demonstrated that defiance had replaced compliance and, because it was successful and enjoyable, it escalated these actions. Their spirited resistance drew praise at the time from the Forward which described them as “magnificent”.\textsuperscript{135}

Women set up their own committees and held meetings to rally support and devise resistance strategies. They organised high profile marches for propaganda purposes to show the extent of the discontent and, by using hard-hitting slogans, they gained the moral high ground. Devoting much of their precious free time, housewives demonstrated a high level of commitment to their fight. Efficient female communication networks and personal contact ensured large numbers attended their protest events, conducted in an orderly fashion. Women took a responsible attitude to protests as was evident in the McHugh case when they withdrew pickets on hearing of the factor’s illness.

In addition to collective protest, several women, such as Mary Barbour, displayed leadership qualities, and on many occasions defiantly challenged men in positions of superior power and authority with considerable success. This was a departure from normal female deferential behaviour and surprised many factors and landlords. Women’s belief in the justice of their cause gave them courage to resist powerful opposition. This work suggests that women drew their inspiration from previous protest campaigns in Ireland and the Highlands which furnished them with the conviction that they could achieve a positive outcome.

\textsuperscript{134} Bohstedt, \textit{Riots and Community Politics}, p. 222/3.
\textsuperscript{135} Forward, 13.11.1915, p. 8, c. 4 & 5.
Aware of their weak financial position and their lack of industrial muscle, women leaders sensibly enlisted the help of their male counterparts and many protests were undertaken jointly. Women’s experience of working co-operatively in Co-operative Guilds and being members of several organisations such as Tenants’ Defence Associations and GWHA, enabled them to forge strong alliances between disparate groups. Combining the female drive and energy generated by housing grievances with the anger and militancy created by industrial grievances, gave the rent strike campaign great strength. Work-gate meetings and picketing near shipyards and munitions factories reinforced the connections between men and women’s common interests. Using their ‘soft power’ women were influential in maintaining cohesion within the various groups and created successful joint working.

When male shipyard workers were summoned to court for rent debt, large numbers of women accompanied them to demonstrate solidarity. The victory achieved when the cases were dropped stimulated activists to plan greater protests. Despite the country’s war-time vulnerability, industrial workers threatened a massive withdrawal of labour in support of the rent-strikers demands. The government was forced to act, not from principle, but from the necessity of preventing potential disruption to war-time production. The government fearing a revolution - a point much debated in the historiography - agreed to the strikers demands to freeze working-class rents at the pre-war levels and quickly passed a bill through parliament. The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act 1915 took immediate effect and was a just reward for the courage, determination and resolve of the rent protestors, particularly the women.

The act did not solve the Glasgow housing problem, but it established a precedent for governmental rent controls which lasted until 1989 and which benefitted large numbers of working-class tenants throughout the British Isles. One consequence of the strike campaign
was that several female leaders subsequently developed successful careers in local politics and contributed to positive reforms in female and welfare issues.

No claim is made that this is a comprehensive account of rent strike nor a discussion of women’s role in terms of their political activity or their relationship with labour and the ILP. The attitude of the police to female rent protestors is possibly a profitable topic for future research. This investigation into female protest activity has revealed that women played a crucial role in the success of the rent strike. It has shown that great credit is due to ordinary working-class Glashow house-wives who achieved extraordinary things. Speaking at a demonstration organised by the GWHA, Helen Crawfurd stated, “this fight was essentially, a woman’s fight… they were “not asking for money, not for charity; they were asking for justice” and is a fitting description of the rent protests of 1915.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Melling, Rent Strikes, p. 92.
Appendix 1

List of Personnel

Women

Mary Barbour  Leader of the South Govan Women’s Housing Association. Many believe she led the 1915 rent strike. Member of the ILP. Member of the Women’s Co-operative Guild

Agnus Dollan  Suffragette, member of the ILP, anti-war campaigner. Treasurer of GWHA. Married Patrick Dollan in 1912

Helen Crawfurd  Suffragette. Established the Peace Crusade in 1916, member of the ILP but later left to join the Communist Party of Great Britain

Mrs Fergusson  Little is known of Mrs Fergusson joint author of letter to Harland and Wolf.

Mrs Nixon  Leader of Maryhill Tenants Association. Spoke at deputation to the Glasgow Council in October

Men

John Wheatley  Glasgow Labour Councillor

Patrick Dollan  Glasgow Labour Councillor

Willie Gallacher  Shop steward, leader of Clyde Workers

David Kirkwood  Leader of Beardmore workers

Harry McShane  Socialist activist

John MacLean  Marxist. Established the Communist Party of Great Britain
Appendix 2

Mary Barbour’s Army by A Hulett

In the tenements o’Glesga in the year one nine one five
It was one lang bloody struggle tae keep ourselves alive
We were cootin oot the coppers tae buy wor scraps o’ food
When the landlords pit the rent up just because they could, A’the factories were hummin’,
there was overtime galore
But the wages they were driven doon tae subsidise the war
Oot came Mrs Barbour fae her wee bit single end
She said I’ll organise the lassies if i cannae raise the men

Chorus

‘Cos I’m fae Govan an’ ye’re fae Partick
This yin here’s fae Bridge O Weir and thon’s fae Kinning Park
There’s some that’s Prots and some that’s Catholic
But we’re Mrs Barbour’s Army and we’re here to dae the wark

Mrs barbour made a poster sayin’ we’ll no pay higher rent
Then chapped on every door of every Govan tenement
She said, “pit this in the windae an’ when ye hea me bang the drum
We’ll run oot and chase the factor a’ the way tae kingdom come”
When the poor wee soul cam roon, he was battered black an’ blue
By a regiment in pinnies that knew just whit tae do
Mrs Barbour organised the gaitherin’ o’ the clans
And they burst oot o’the steamie armed wi pots an fryin’ pans

Mrs Barbour’s Army spread through Glesga like the plague
The maisters got the message and the message wis’nae vague
While oor menfolk fight the Kaiser we’ll stay hame and fight the war
Against the greedy bastards woo keep gindin’ doon the poor
If ye want tae stop conscription stand and fight the profiteers
Bring the hale big bloody sandpit crashin’ doon aroon’ their ears
We’ll no starve said Mrs Barbour, while the men we ca’ wor ain
Are marchin’ add tae hae their hairt’s blood washed like watter doon a drain

Well it didnae tak the Government that lang tae realise
If ye crack doon on the leaders the rest will compromise
They arrested Mrs Barbour and they clapper her in the jile
But they made an awfy big mistake, they let her oot on bail
She ca’ad the men oot o’ the factories on the Clyde and on the Cart
They marched up tae the courthouse sayin’ we’ll tear the place apart
Mrs Barbour’s Army brought the maisters tae their knees
We’ a regiment in pinnies backed by one in dungarees

Source: Paisley Heritage Centre, folder on Mary Barbour
Folksinger A Hulett put his words to music and can be seen on Youtube
Appendix 3

Mary Barbour’s Rattle

The rioty past
of its hand-waxed
handle
*Rattety, rattety*
Crank turns, wood aligns,
sound alarms
*Rattety, rattety*
Mary’s army,
holding the fort,
with the men off
fighting
*Rattety, rattety*
Sounding the rattle,
they ratted on bailiffs
*Ratt-a-tat-tat*
intent on evictions

from trench-dreamed
hearth-sides
*Rattety, rattety! the Govan artillery
Ratta–ratta –tatt! the echo back

Poem by Christine Flinn

Courtesy of National Musuem of Scotland
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