

What Feminists Can Teach Us About Handling the COVID Crisis

A snapshot of the ideas and conversations at [WOW London 2020's](#) feminist events – and how they can help us better understand the gendered impacts and solutions to the pandemic.

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On the first weekend of March, London played host to the WOW Festival, a vibrant global annual celebration of women, girls, and their lives. The UK hadn't seen any COVID-related casualties on its soil yet, but the tension was palpable as reports rushed in from around the world. Every session I attended that weekend highlighted very real issues that set the stage for how the COVID-19 crisis was about to affect women, minorities, and LGBTIQ people.

Every global crisis has gendered impacts – whether it's war, poverty, or climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. This means that the ramifications of the crisis and governmental responses to it have disproportionate impacts on women and marginalized communities in the UK and the world over. Here's what some of the WOW Festival's speakers taught me about unpacking that inequality:

Crises Need Intersectional Feminist Responses

One of the stars of the weekend, '[F*ck Forgiveness](#)' was a panel discussion chaired by [Hannah Azieb Pool](#), featuring Jumoke Abdullahi of disability rights group [Triple Cripples](#), Advocacy Academy Programmes Director Liz Ward, Jazandrea Byrdsong of [S.O.U.L Sisters Collective](#), and author [Minna Salami](#). The discussion explored misogyny, anti-blackness in other POC communities, and how the burden of forgiving injustice falls on Black women. The conversation made it clear that an intersectional lens is mandatory in understanding the disproportionate effects of social challenges, and that systemic racism exacerbates other issues – including public health issues like COVID. With [Black women 4.3 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts in the UK](#), it is necessary to question what structural and socio-economic inequalities exist that cause this disparity.

Another all-star line-up including [former President of Ireland Mary Robinson](#) graced the stage for [Climate Justice: A Man-Made Problem With a Feminist Solution](#). The speakers also illustrated the very deeply gendered nature of crises, and explained that while women are certainly disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, they are also the key to community-driven local solutions. This is an excellent example as we see predominantly women-led community responses during COVID lockdowns such as mutual aid blossom during the pandemic lockdowns.

The Gender Data Gap is *Literally* Killing Women

Best-selling author and feminist advocate [Caroline Criado Perez](#) sold out the Queen Elizabeth Hall with a discussion on her book "[Invisible Women](#)". Along with Poppy (her very small and very sweet dog), Perez explored the crucial importance of gender-disaggregated data across fields, exploring the notion that most things – from mobile phones to cars to medicine – are designed with men as the default body. What this means is that there is a fundamental lack of data, research, and understanding as to the needs of women's bodies and lives. The fatal repercussions of this can be seen via heart attacks, car crashes, and now...COVID-19.

Even though [77% of frontline healthcare workers, and 9 out of 10 nurses are women](#), PPE and uniforms are generally designed for the male body. [Ill-fitting protective equipment is not just cumbersome, it's also lethal](#). In addition to this, gender-disaggregated data helps us understand the unique challenges of the women healthcare workers and unpaid care workers who are on the frontlines of the disease. Disaggregated data can also help us recognize how identities (particularly of women of colour, low-paid essential workers etc) intersect and are disproportionately affected. For example, according to the [New York Times](#), in the United States "of the 5.8 million people working health care jobs that pay less than \$30,000 a year, half are nonwhite and 83 percent are women."

Thanks to development organizations' insistence on sex-disaggregated data, it has now become easier to [accurately quantify and understand the different ways in which the disease is spreading and what its impacts are](#) – and start planning accordingly.

Domestic Violence is Everyone's Problem

The [Duchess of Cornwall opened WOW London 2020 with a speech on domestic violence](#), which despite decades of programmes and interventions is still as widespread as ever. As governments around the world enforced lockdowns, calling it "sheltering in place", for many, home is not a shelter but is rather the stage for domestic abuse. [Around the world, domestic violence spiked](#) as women became trapped at home with abusive partners. While common discourse blames the violence on enforced close quarters, alcohol, and tensions over lay-offs and financial constraints, the reality is that [intimate partner violence is due to entitlement and need for domination/power learned via social norms and gender roles](#).

The Duchess' speech was followed by a [powerful panel discussion featuring incredible activists and 'intimate terrorism' survivors](#). The session explored the ways in which survivors internalised social shame for the abuse they were facing, or felt fear stemming from a need to protect their children, both of which made it tough to leave their partners or homes. The participants at the session also spoke of the lack of social safety nets for women trying to get out of abusive situations.

Apart from social changes, governments globally also need to make substantial funding and personnel commitments in order to ensure that this [shadow pandemic does not continue to spread](#). In the immediate wake of the first few weeks of lockdown, [governments seemed surprised the extent at which IPV has spiked and started to pledge funds](#) – but feminists have been warning them for decades.

Queer POC are at Risk – Homed or Unhomed

The [Desi: Out and Proud](#) event served as an important reminder that young queer folk, especially from more conservative South Asian immigrant families, depend on queer spaces to feel a sense of belonging and freedom. Lockdowns, followed by shutdowns and bans on gatherings have made it impossible for queer youths to access safe, inclusive spaces like LGBTIQ-friendly shelters or meeting spaces like the [Kali nightclub](#). Without these safe outlets of expression and community, [mental health can become a pervasive issue for queer youth](#), who are finding themselves “having to hide again”.

This has also left many facing an impossible decision between an unforgiving home and the precarity of homelessness. In fact, queer youth, particularly minorities, are disproportionately vulnerable to possible homelessness or abuse. In fact, [according to Gal-Dem](#), “A quarter of young people facing homelessness in the UK identify as being a part of the LGBTIQ+ community. Of that figure, 61% are people of colour, rising to 79% in London.”

The pandemic isn't gender-blind in its impacts. That much is clear from the disproportionate percentage of women on the frontlines as healthcare workers, or the rates of domestic abuse, or the particular vulnerability of people of colour and people belonging to the LGBTIQ community. However, as feminist leadership at the WOW Festival and [across the global political stage](#) has shown us, there are also solutions that require empathetic and participatory responses.

[Arundhati Roy](#) best explains the unique opportunity we have at this juncture, to re-imagine how we want to structure our communities and social dynamics:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”