

International Women's Day 2021 and the Fight to End Violence Against Women



International Women's Day 2021 preceded a pretty unfortunate couple of weeks for women in the UK. The day itself is a tradition we have celebrated since 1975. Then, it was an unprecedented mandate to celebrate women, at a time when we did not know social or economic freedom. In the 1970s it became much easier for women to be doctors, politicians, academics, etc, and they demanded a new respect from their male peers in the workplace. It's interesting to think about how the feminists of the women's liberation movement would react to the few weeks' events. In some ways, the world has moved a long way forward since then, and in others absolutely nothing has changed for women at all. Fundamentally, International Women's Day is meant for the celebration of women who have excelled in their field, and those who are helping to empower the everyday women who are yet to break through the glass ceiling. In all honesty, though, the feminist movement has moved on in the last 46 years, and it's clear that we no longer need this messaging encouraging us to support and empower each other. Our culture is saturated with images of female empowerment, in music, films, and

television, as it should be, every day of the year. It is not women who need to change their behavior to combat the remaining structures of patriarchy left in our societies, it's the behavior of men that needs to change, and this is the mood we currently see circulating on social media.

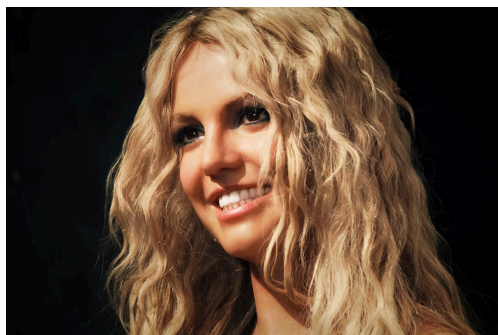
The theme of this year's International Women's Day was [#choosetochallenge](#); challenge yourself first and foremost, and then challenge the stereotypes that hold women back. How can you challenge the barriers that obstruct you, when those barriers consist of hundreds of years of entrenched misogyny, rape culture, economic oppression, and a lack of representation in government? This perpetuates the myth that women remain second-class citizens because we are not pushing hard enough for our equality, it places the burden on us, almost suggesting that if women were just a bit more ambitious, it shouldn't be too hard for us to change the fundamental power structures of society. Women have been campaigning for gender equality for decades, and the entrenched powers in Britain remain oblivious to the challenges we still face, beyond providing a quote once a year on March 8th.

The Pandemic has broadened the gaps in gender equality in society in five major ways, as documented by the [European Commission](#). We are going backwards not forwards. Across the whole world, recorded acts of domestic violence are up and have been since the virus first left us confined to our homes. There were 25% more calls than average to the women's charity refuge in April 2020, and this increase in numbers is met by the seriously decreased capacity of women's shelters across the UK, as a result of [sharp austerity cuts during Theresa May's government](#). At the first response level, it is mostly women risking their lives to fight the pandemic, as [76% of health workers across Europe are female](#). Yet the COVID-19 decision-making bodies that are fighting the virus from the safety of Zoom (and with considerably better pay than nurses receive) are typically male-dominated. Of 115 European COVID national task forces, 85.2% are mostly male, and only 3.5% reflect parity of pay between the genders. Women shouldered the burden of the collapsing job market during the first wave, as we occupy most of the hospitality and retail jobs that shut down in March 2020. In the summer period when these sectors opened for business, employment rates rose by 1.4% for men and 0.8% for women. To top it all off, the lockdown periods demonstrated the continued burden that falls on women to undertake domestic work and childcare. [During the quarantine](#), women completed 23 hours per week of housework and 62 hours per week of childcare, while men contributed only 13 and 36 hours per week retrospectively. We are being shut out of the

workplace and forced back into the home by a global health crisis, but we can break free by challenging ourselves a bit harder, right?

On this year's IWD, the news was already focused on the upcoming interview with Megan Markle and Prince Harry, which would air in the UK 5 days later. Megan, whose femaleness and vocality, mixed with her blackness, is the perfect target for another kind of violence against women: harassment and demonisation by the press. She claims the British media made her life a living hell, punishing her for being a black American in a space that has always been reserved for white aristocracy. All of the usual misogynistic tactics were deployed relentlessly against her, depicting her as shallow and demanding, and framing her as the female villain. She was painted as a manipulative liar who uses the influence she possesses over her naive husband to seek attention and to isolate him from his family. [Images of her holding her husband's hand were circulated](#) and captioned with the phrase "coercive control." When she explained to Oprah that the relentless hate from the media drove her to the point of contemplating suicide, several prominent voices accused her of lying as a manipulative tactic to gain sympathy. Through this, Megan shared an experience with the thousands of women and girls: being disbelieved about their [physical pain](#) or [mental health problems](#). At doctor's surgeries and hospitals, women frequently have their health concerns dismissed, and are not taken seriously when they describe their pain levels.

The interview also reignited the cultural criticism of the tabloid press, which was brought under a harsh light in January by the New York Times documentary 'Framing Britney Spears.' The film discusses how Spears was forced to maintain both a highly sexualised image for publicity, whilst remaining a virgin to protect her from moral condemnation. As a sixteen-year-old girl, she was never given the freedom to curate her own image. When she grew up, her body became public property, and she was bullied relentlessly by the media. Her ability to parent her children was questioned, driving her to a mental breakdown for which she was demonised further. Under her father's [conservatorship](#) since the breakdown, she still lacks the legal freedom to buy a sandwich without permission. The film is a visual demonstration of the media destroying a life with weaponised misogyny. A



Guardian [report](#) has since compared Spears' experience with those of other women who were most bullied by the tabloid media around the same time: Monica Lewinsky, Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, Anna Nicole Smith, Lindsey Lohan, and Paris Hilton, who was the victim of what we now call revenge porn. These women were hated and condemned by both women and men at the time. These are the women feminism left behind. We are just catching up with them now, twenty years later.

Violence against women has been trending online for several weeks, in response to a few high-profile news stories. Earlier in the month, Britney Higgins, an ex-staffer of the Australian parliament alleged that she was [raped inside the government building in 2019](#). Just like Megan Markle, she was branded a ["lying cow,"](#) and received a tirade of victim blaming. Meanwhile, in the US, the governor of New York has been accused of inappropriate behavior, allegedly hiring women he finds attractive, offering them a career in exchange for unwanted touching and uncomfortable comments about their appearance. An [accuser, who claims he kissed her inside his office without her consent](#), was the target of a smear campaign in which she was described as a racist bully. Interviews with people who have worked under Cuomo describe an atmosphere of toxic masculinity, verbal abuse, misogyny, and bullying; a stark contrast from the romantic image of him as a COVID hero that was prevalent a year ago. It begs the question, how many of our male authority figures are presiding over an office atmosphere in which women are only allowed to flourish if they surrender to unwanted sexual attention? For men, an aggressive workplace demeanor is a sign of strong leadership and competency, but women in the workplace tend to be labeled bullies if they do not work hard to appease everyone. It's clear that many prominent men in public office use these power tactics to abuse women at work. The fight for equality in the workplace is far from over.

The biggest story of the week: the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard by an off-duty police officer, caught the attention of women all over Britain. How can we be celebrating the achievements of women across the world, when a woman is not safe to walk alone through central London at night? Women are sick and tired of having to fear violence or sexual harassment in the streets. Sarah's death struck a chord with this fear, and with utter frustration over the idea that they are responsible for keeping themselves safe in public. Men are the perpetrators of nearly all of Britain's violent crime, so it is our culture, not the behavior of women that needs to change. Women do not need to be more careful when alone in public, men need to stop raping and killing us, and when they do, they need to receive the appropriate response

from the criminal justice system. Enough of the constant portrayal of women as victims. [Two women die of femicide every week in the UK](#). Nearly 1500 women over ten years have been killed by men, usually by their ex or current partner. [Older women](#) who are killed by their sons or husbands often slip under the radar; their deaths are often recorded as accidents, and not included in crime statistics. Every year Jess Phillips MP reads aloud the names of femicide victims in the Houses of Commons. Watching this is a haunting experience and a perfect reminder to us all of our collective loss. [Women are victims everywhere you look](#); almost every film and television show relies on the gruesome rape or murder of an innocent woman to stir up the drama. The destroyed bodies of women are casually inflicted upon us all the time, normalising the violence and the image of women as prey

A vigil for Sarah, held on Clapham Common on the 13th of March, ended in violence when police moved in at sunset to clear the crowd. The response from protestors and the press was shock and horror, as they watched grieving women be dragged away in handcuffs by officers who trampled on the flowers that had been laid out for Sarah. The irony of the fact that the MET used violence against women, to end a demonstration in the name of violence against women, was deepened by the fact that it had been a MET officer in the first place that killed Sarah. This event served to confirm the suspicions of a large group of women that the police force is fundamentally misogynistic. Since the protest, [documents have been released](#) revealing the number of officers under investigation for committing sexual offenses while they were on duty. All of this demonstrates contempt for women and it has been met with absolute disgust. The MET, which has not formally apologised, is led by a woman for the first time, and the home secretary is also a woman. This just should not have happened. The command to shut down the vigil most likely came straight from Patel herself (who hates protest in all forms) and favours the police using force against demonstrators. The home secretary is a child of immigrants who favours processing asylum seekers on an island thousands of miles away from the UK, so that most will be turned away without ever setting foot on British soil. She perpetuates the myth that to be a woman in power, it's also necessary to be a bully, eschewing sympathy for fear of looking weak.

The [history of the women's movement](#) is defined by protest. It is the method through which women have had the most success in making the legal changes that improved the position of women in society. The suffrage movement used violent action, such as smashing show windows

and blowing up postboxes. The 1970s campaigns in search of “equal pay for equal work” used strike action to demonstrate the contribution that women were making in the workplace. It's understandable then, that women are raising the alarm over the [new policing bill](#) currently being debated by MPs, which includes an increase in police powers to combat street protests. The police will have increased powers over peaceful protests, due to COVID restrictions. Peaceful protest is a human right, and many fear that the government will use this time to rush through restrictive legislation that would usually be met with mass demonstration. The bill aims to make protests more convenient for businesses and for local authorities, by restricting demonstrations to designated time slots and approved areas, and only permitting people to march for “appropriate topics.” Protest exists to draw attention to an issue by causing a disruption; if there is no disruption, there is absolutely nothing to stop a protest from being ignored completely. There are several protests every day in the UK, most of which achieve nothing even if they make the local news.

The violence in London was swiftly followed by a mass shooting in Atlanta, which, despite targeting Asian massage parlours, is yet to be officially declared a hate crime. Eight people are dead, including six Asian women who worked minimum wage jobs, placing them among the most marginalised in American society. Economic oppression is felt worst by women who identify as part of an ethnic minority group. In April 2020, the wage gap was around 15.5% and women were earning 80 pence for every pound made by men in the UK (the US figures are similar), a reflection of the power imbalance that keeps women financially vulnerable. The perpetrator (a devout Christian), claims that he is a sex addict who found the massage parlours to be a place of temptation. He chose to destroy the temptation by destroying the objects of his desire. Asian women, who are often [fetishised by Western culture](#), fell victim to the same pattern of violence that women are subjected to time and time again. The strong attraction to something that he felt was inaccessible because of his religion, gave him feelings of shame and frustration that drove him to murder innocent women rather than deal with his own conflicting emotions. He blames the women for this attraction, as if it is their failing. Patriarchal culture prevents men from learning how to handle feelings of pain and conflict. Instead they are encouraged to display strength, leading to terrible outbursts of violence. The [2021 film “I Care A Lot,”](#) explores this issue when the protagonist (Rosamund Pike), responds to a threat of violence without fear. She explains that when men have nothing left to argue with, they without fail “call you a bitch and threaten to murder you.” This weaponised misogyny, which absolves men of any responsibility, is another symptom of the culture that encourages young girls to cover up their bodies in

American schools in order not to 'distract' their male classmates. Young boys are never pressured the way girls are to take responsibility for their thoughts and actions. This is the fundamental cultural change that we need to change the endless cycles of femicide and rape culture.

So where does this leave the women's movement in 2021? The issues we face today look very different from one hundred years ago when we had finally smashed enough windows to be welcomed into the British democratic process. Women remain the recipients of countless acts of violence, and our freedoms are restricted by the fear of this violence. The violence is present in the workplace and in the home. Our methods of protesting against this violence are being stripped away from us, and yet women are not discouraged, and there is a sense that these discussions are only just getting started. Women have been fighting for equality for decades, and the fight will inevitably continue for many more decades to come.

If you want to read more, or even get involved, here are some useful links:

<https://secure.greenpeace.org.uk/page/s/the-right-to-protest>

<https://www.sistersuncut.org/>

<https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/>