

WORDS VANESSA BLACKLEDGE


 WOW
CAMBRIDGE
JUNCTION

Women of the World festival Cambridge

Celebrate the achievements of women and girls from across the globe at the Cambridge leg of this annual event

WHAT IS WOW?

The Women of the World Festival, appropriately known as WOW, was launched on International Women's Day 2011 by Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre. It's the world's largest festival network of its kind and, since its conception, has grown into a global movement, with 15 festivals on five continents and counting. The

aim is celebration; a celebration of the achievements of women and girls across the world. But it also takes time to explore the obstacles that hinder them.

Each festival lasts between a day and a week, and comprises talks, debates, performance, music and activism, as well as a marketplace packed with stands, from handmade crafts for sale to businesses and charities that have women at their heart and (crucially) a free creche.

WOW has received a lot of high profile attention since its birth, with past speakers including Malala Yousafzai, Patrick Stewart, Salma Hayek, Annie Lennox, Caitlin Moran and former PM Gordon Brown. In 2015, The Duchess of Cornwall became WOW's President and there's even talk of a WOW Commonwealth Festival at the Commonwealth Games in 2018 on Australia's Gold Coast. ➤



WHY IS WOW IMPORTANT?

There was a lot of good news for women across the globe in 2015: Nigeria's outgoing president Goodluck Jonathan banned female genital mutilation (FGM). Germany passed a law for gender quotas in the boardroom. Brazil and Columbia became the latest Latin American countries to pass specific femicide laws. Malawi's Senior Chief Inkosi Kachindamoto annulled 330 child marriages. Canada appointed a gender-equal cabinet ("because it's 2015"). And

good old Sweden added the gender-neutral pronoun 'hen' to its dictionary.

It's clear that there's a continuing worldwide appetite for shifts in attitudes towards women. However, according to UN Women (the UN body for gender equality and empowerment of women), one in three women still experience physical or sexual violence. Women who have been victims of sexual or physical abuse are more likely to be infected with HIV. 43% of women in the 28 European Union member states have experienced some form of psychological violence. 92% of women in New Delhi reported

sexual violence in public spaces. More than 700 million women alive today were married as children. One in ten girls across the globe have experienced forced sex. 133 million girls have been subjected to FGM. And women and girls make up 70% of all human trafficking detected worldwide.

Safe to say that there's still an awful lot of work to be done, which is where WOW comes in.

So far WOW Festivals have been launched in Egypt's Alexandria, Baltimore, Brisbane, Cardiff, Londonderry, Harlem, Australia's Katherine, Sydney, and, of course, our own Cambridge. Over one million people have been involved globally already, and it's Festival policy to make all its content available online, for free, which is a hugely important part of getting its messages to women who may be isolated.

WOW London made history when it became one of the first public places where survivors of FGM spoke in a mainstream context, leading to a change in government policy, announced by David Cameron in 2014, to outlaw the practice. Over 10,000 women have been mentored globally as part of their free Speed Mentoring. And they are establishing a year-round programme of events globally, in partnership with organisations like Plan, including WOW Wheels on the UN's International Day of the Girl Child, with 400 girls speed-mentored on the London Eye, so far, by successful women from all walks of life.



FRINGE

GOOD VIBRATIONS GAMELAN PROJECT Workshop and talk about Bath Spa's research on female offenders

#EPICFAIL Four high profile women discuss their career failures

HISTORY OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION Talk and exhibition on women's education in Cambridge

ART BY WOMEN AT THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM Eliza Gluckman discusses art by women



WOW CAMBRIDGE

WOW Cambridge became a fully-fledged event in 2015, and was such a success that this year's programme is already jostling. Back in October the organisers held a 'think-in' which was open to any interested party within the community. The aim was simply to throw ideas around as to what people would like to see featured. Radio 1 DJ Gemma Cairney, who is on the committee for the London WOW, told us: "Each time a think-in is held we all come out reverberating with excitement and food for thought. There is something inexplicably powerful about sounding off, asking questions, learning from each other's experiences and creating a space which is women focused." Perhaps it's unsurprising that Cambridge's think-in returned education as a strong theme.

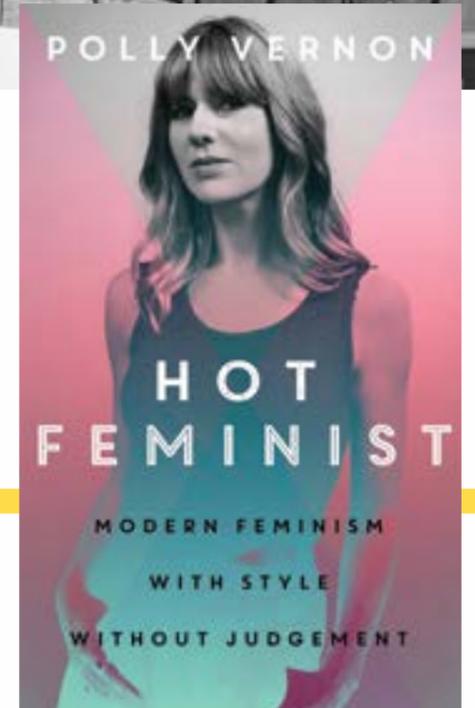
Education in relation to gender is at the heart of WOW Cambridge, and that's reflected in this year's programme. Sigrid Fisher is one of the organisers of Women of the World Cambridge and she explains that Cambridge is an important centre for the festival because of its links to education, but stresses that this is not an academic event, rather, it's a



place for community and for a broad sharing of ideas and experience that is accessible to everyone. "It's very important that there's a local feel – that makes it really relevant."

A TASTE OF WHO'S TO COME

Polly Vernon, author of joyfully controversial book *Hot Feminist*, which challenges more traditional feminist ideologies with its sexy, man-loving tone, will be on the panel for Seen and Heard,



discussing how women are perceived and listened to (or not). When we asked why she thinks WOW is important she said, "It's incredibly important that we keep discussing the issues that impact women; as our lives change, those issues change, so it needs to be a constant and evolving chat. I also think we need to embrace as many perspectives and experiences as



possible through the discussion, which is something WOW does well.”

You may remember Charlotte Proudman from the LinkedIn sexism storm last year, when she held a man who made inappropriate comments on her profile picture to account. Beyond that she’s a staggeringly accomplished woman; a barrister in family law, an expert in female genital mutilation, forced marriage and honour-based violence, and a doctoral researcher here at Cambridge researching FGM in England and Wales. We asked her if feminism is still important here in the UK where we have relative equality compared with women in other countries, and she said, “Patriarchy is universal and cross-cultural; it’s not something to one society and not others... I think it’s important to have feminism wherever you have gender inequality.”

Full-time mum Caroline Jones set up her blog, Knickers Model’s Own, after her mother Mary lost her battle with cancer. She decided to wear a different outfit every day for a year, sourced from her local Cancer Research charity shop. In her

first week she’d had 97,000 hits and at the close of 2015 she had raised just shy of £50,000 (donate at www.justgiving.com/knickers-models-own). Her astonishment at her own ability, realised later in life, will inspire: “I never saw myself as someone to speak for women. It was only during this campaign, when I was invited to speak in Cardiff, at that moment I felt fantastic! Before I didn’t think I had anything to say on any subject.”

WOW Cambridge takes place on the 5 March at Cambridge Junction. Fringe events take place 1-7 March, and International Women’s Day is 7 March. Keep your eyes on the WOW and *Cambridge Edition* websites for the programme of events and speakers for the festival and fringe. ✕

www.wowcambridge.cam.ac.uk

HIGHLIGHTS

MIGHTY WOMEN Featuring women who do amazing things: Harriet Minter, Sarah Leiter, Hollie McNish

#NOTGUILTY A panel discussing sexual violence on campus: Angie Stewart, Ione Wells, Janine Booth, Emerald O’Hanrahan, Graham Virgo, Rachel Fenton

WOMEN IN POLITICS Sophie Walker, Frances Scott, Helen Pankhurst

TO INFINITY AND BEYOND Women in science and engineering: Finn Mackay, Kate Smurthwaite, Taryn Gleeson, Tamsyn Challenger

WOMEN AND CRIME Loraine Gelsthorpe, Colleen Moore, Diana Minns

SEEN AND HEARD How women are perceived and listened to (or not): Alice Wroe, Priscilla Mensah, Cat Crossley

WOMEN, WAR AND PEACE Jennifer Barnes, Anne Lonsdale, Hazel Thompson, Rehab Jameel

WOMEN AND EDUCATION Mabel van Orange and Katherine Wilson

