

## Editorial

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### **The Possibilities of Feminism(s) in an Uncertain World**

When we published the first edition of Dearcadh, in the summer of 2020, we were working through what seemed to be an exceptional, but short-lived, experience. Little did we imagine that one year on we would have continued to work through a full year of COVID-19 related restrictions. MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights students, like students throughout the world, graduated virtually in 2020. A new intake of MA students undertook their entire programme online. The world of 2020 and 2021 was certainly unlike anything we could have imagined when we first decided to create this journal.

For many of us, this is our first direct experience of a pandemic. For some of us, it is not, as we continue to live through the HIV pandemic/global epidemic and the 'pandemic' of violence against women. For all of us though, the changes wrought on society as governments attempt to curtail COVID transmission have created unexpected challenges to how we work, socialise and engage in academia and activism. We know that change can also bring opportunity. While our interactions across various spheres have been diminished or removed over the past 18 months, we have also found new means to re-create such interactions. As feminists, we may draw from the traditions of feminist utopian thinking (Johns, 2010) to see possibility in the breakdown of our traditional social spaces and interactions and imagine new worlds where old processes, dependent on patriarchal orders, may be replaced.

And yet, there is little evidence of this occurring presently. Despite some early hopes that widespread home-working might change the unequal gender dynamics of the private sphere, that recognition of women's unequal contributions to care might result in higher status and better pay for nurses, health care assistants and other professions allied to medicine and dominated by women, and that a crisis of this magnitude would create opportunities for policies and practices based on greater equality, none of this has materialised. As is so often the case, this emergency, as others before it, has instead led to the reinforcement of gender inequality across a number of indicators. Rather than a more gender equal world, we instead see higher rates of domestic violence, an increase in the already unequally high contributions to caring work by women, and a failure to advance gender equality in policies (Duvvury, et.al. 2021)

COVID alone, however, cannot be blamed for all of these failures. Across the globe there have been advances made by misogynist and racist ideologies that threaten to regress women's rights – a trend that began long before the first case of COVID-19 was detected. The desire to return to mythical 'origins' most commonly associated with ethno or religious nationalism, is now present across both the left and right political spectrum (see for instance Yuval-Davis et al. 2018). Attacks on the concept of 'gender ideology' seek to narrow the possibilities of progress towards equality, targeting women and trans people in particular (Correa 2017). Feminisms themselves, never a single coherent viewpoint, have struggled to find sufficient common ground to counter such challenges and have at times fallen into opposing ideological camps that do nothing to advance women's - all women's - position.

The conjuncture presents particular challenges - both methodological and ideological - to new and early career researchers. Covid-related restrictions – especially restrictive and long-lasting in Ireland through 2020 – drove students to digital research methods and removed the scope for fieldwork. This demanded levels of adaptability and creativity among students and presented particular challenges for qualitative research whose methods so often emphasise immersion in social settings. The authors in this volume found a variety of alternative responses to this challenge. Some (McMahon and Mangan) embrace the digital turn by researching online dynamics, an important site of study long before the pandemic. In a similar vein, Butler carried out close readings of literary and theoretical texts. Other articles (Savage, Kalelo-Phiri) present research that might have been conducted differently were it not for the restrictions associated with the pandemic. Instead of face-to-face interviews or immersions, these authors fell back on online data collection, to great benefit. As the nature of qualitative research changes with the passing of the first phase of the pandemic, these experiences will prove formative to new types of research.

In spite of, or indeed possibly because of, the uncertainties that cloud almost every aspect of life right now, students have continued to learn, researchers continue to research and a new cohort of graduates found the time and mental energy to produce the articles that feature in this second edition of *Dearcadh: Graduate journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights*. Given these times, it is of no surprise that what unites these disparate articles is their shared desire to deepen their understanding of feminism and to explore its possibilities in an unequal world.

Articles in this edition engage with the meaning of feminism and the stigma that continues to surround gender equality activism and identity (Butler, Savage, Kalelo-Phiri), and investigate the role of technology, both in creating new identities and in facilitating gender-based violence (McMahon and Mangan). In these articles we see that the trajectory of gender equality is not straightforward or unidirectional with innovations and progress encountering or creating new challenges for achieving gender equality.

Grappling with the challenges of gender inequality in the 21st century, the changing face of feminism is one consistent theme. Both Savage and Mangan engage with post-feminism as a lens for understanding contemporary womanhood, specifically among young university-going women in NUI Galway (Savage) and self-labelled *Dev\_Girls*, young women working in software technology (Mangan). Drawing on the work of Rosalind Gill, both authors reflect on the paradoxes of the struggle for gender equality in late capitalist liberal democracies. Savage explores the attitudes of young women to pop music and feminism, and the connections between these topics. Her anonymous survey revealed that whilst some respondents believed their music choices influenced their feminist beliefs, there is no clear correlation between

feminism and popular music. Savage shows how, via popular culture and pop music, post-feminist sensibilities simultaneously render feminism more acceptable to young women, and cheapen or commodify the work of feminism. Savage's research participants displayed a degree of awareness of these contradictions, and often demonstrated a nuanced engagement with both popular culture and political change.

Mangan's research with the 'Dev\_Girls' addresses the competing identities faced by women working in the male dominated technology industry by analysing the role of Instagram in negotiating the self-representation of women as heteronormatively feminine, how this interacts with their identifies as software coders, and how this intersection can be challenged. In her explorations of the contradictions of 21st century feminisms, Mangan finds that postfeminist sensibilities promote the visibility of gender equality struggles in the tech sector, but paradoxically ultimately constrain the field of possibilities for the Dev\_Girls, limiting them to engage with heteronormative femininity underpinned by neoliberal and post-feminist views. Contrary to Savage, Mangan's conclusions are pessimistic: while the Dev\_Girls space on Instagram provides some limited scope for self-representation and even empowerment, it seems to actively restrict the possibility of wider-reaching transformation.

Clair Butler brings an important historic and literary perspective to the explorations in this issue of divisions and debates in feminism. In her article Indigenous Australian Women: Towards a Womanist Perspective, Butler recounts the problems of white anthropological appropriation of Indigenous Australian women's writing, and explores standpoint feminism from a variety of perspectives. Butler investigates the relationship between Dianne Bell's paradigms of 'Man Equals Culture', 'An Anthropology of Women', and 'Towards a Feminist Perspective' and the historical representation of Indigenous Australian women. Whilst Bell's paradigms provide a historical depiction of life for Indigenous Australian women in the 1980's through written accounts by Alice Nannup, and Rita and Jackie Huggins, Butler argues for the reinterpretation of these accounts drawing on Alice Walker's influential concept of womanism. She concludes that a womanist perspective differs from both mainstream and feminist perspectives by giving greater authorship to the individual.

The question of how to engage with a divided and sometimes divisive feminist movement also concerns Joseph Kalelo-Phiri's research paper on male gender equality activists. The title of the article captures the contradictions that frequently beset feminist activism: Kalelo-Phiri's male activists find themselves 'Opposed by men and rejected by women'. This article explores barriers to male involvement in feminist activist movements in order to further understand men's limited engagement, including the persistence of hegemonic and inflexible masculinities in Malawi, legitimised by a rigid understanding of patriarchy and gender equality. Using a qualitative research method, Kalelo-Phiri attributes the limited male participation in GEA to a desire to retain a privileged status in society, a lack of trust on behalf of female activists, and the sharp contrast between hegemonic masculinity and the qualities inherent to being a gender equality activist.

Like Kalelo-Phiri, Ellie McMahon's research into Digital Intimate Relationship Abuse Against Young Women in Ireland engages with the pressing current challenges for feminist activists. McMahon's article explores the uses of digital technology as a tool perpetuating and facilitating intimate partner abuse against young women in Ireland. Drawing on a survey conducted by Ipsos Mori for the National Women's Council of Ireland, McMahon reports that 49% of women

surveyed who had experienced intimate relationship abuse experienced the abuse digitally. By exploring the multifaceted dynamics associated between abuse and digital platforms, the author illustrates the distinct issues related to this form of abuse which predominantly centre around a lack of accountability on behalf of the perpetrators, partnered with an unwillingness for victims to come forward due to stigma and assumptions that they will not be taken seriously. Activism, McMahon concludes, needs to turn towards legal protection regarding image-based abuse in Ireland, within the larger context of education and awareness-raising.

This collection of articles shows diverse authors making use of the tools of feminism to confront the extraordinary challenges of our time – and struggling to refit those tools for purpose. At a time when feminist ideas and methods are urgently needed, the broad collection of movements that fit under the title of feminism present their own difficulties. As our authors highlight, stigma affects people for acting in feminist ways or associating themselves with feminist positions; while within feminism, bitter disputes continue to rage, wave after wave. Disputes explored in this volume include the role of men in activism; the impact of white supremacy and racism; and ways of accommodating capitalism without being co-opted by it. Meanwhile, important work needs to be done, and in spite of the previously unimaginable barriers imposed by the pandemic, these authors have produced valuable research that provides new questions, priorities and directions.

## References

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**About the editors:**

Carol Ballantine completed her PhD in the Centre for Global Women's Studies in NUI Galway in April 2020. Her research explored narratives of violence in the lives of African migrant women in Ireland, and the impacts of stigma and shame. She continues to research, teach and write on the topics of gender, migration and violence in Ireland and internationally.



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Ysabel Monks is a recent graduate from the NUI Galway Masters of Arts course 'Gender, Globalisation and Rights'. Her interests include social policy research and gender equality in family and work. She has participated in various projects involving gender equality in the global garment supply chain and disability rights in Galway city, in addition to her position as editorial assistant for the Dearth graduate journal.