

# BREAKING



# DOWN

**Jude Kelly** CBE, founder of the *WOW – Women of the World Festival*, tells LOUISE HOFFMAN about the obstacles that are still preventing women from achieving their potential – and why it will take actions, as well as words, to accelerate global change

# BARRIERS



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o important is women's potential to Jude Kelly CBE, that in early 2018 she left the prestigious role of artistic director at London's Southbank Centre to focus full time on her increasingly global initiative: the WOW – Women of the World Festival.

Launched in 2010 to celebrate women and girls, the festivals now take place in 23 countries, including Brazil, China, Pakistan, Australia, Egypt, Nigeria, the USA and the UK. With packed programmes of debates, performances, workshops and talks, the events offer the space and freedom for people of all genders to explore the obstacles that prevent women from achieving their potential. To date, approximately two million people have been involved in WOW worldwide.

"I think WOW is educating us all to understand what the global context is, in terms of women's progress," Kelly tells *Observe*. "It's also helping us to become much more active and vocal in recognising what's still to be done and in doing something about it. It's no good just being cross – you have to make change happen."

### Getting down to business

In the workplace, Kelly sees similar issues facing women across the globe. "There are real structural differences in opportunity and privilege that drive women away from the chance to realise their full potential. But another key issue is the underestimation of women and women underestimating themselves – which, when you think about it, is an inevitable circular issue," says Kelly.

Far from being a genetic imprint, Kelly considers this lack of self-belief to be a product of the culture women are raised in and surrounded by on a daily basis. "If you're brought up to believe that your role is being an assistant or a

support structure to something, then the idea of stepping up to be the leader has been discouraged," she explains. "Of course, this is gradually breaking down all over the world, and there are some places where women have a good deal more confidence and authority than others, but the tendency for insecurity, self-degradation, apology or lack of confidence is everywhere.

"The real frustration," Kelly continues, "is that, wherever you are in the world, you're underneath a kind of overarching sky that theologically, and therefore philosophically, tells you that girls and women are second to boys and men. You can make progress, but any rights you're given are conditional on society allowing you to have them.

"In some of the places WOW has been, such as Somaliland, Pakistan and Nepal, there are still some rigid ideas about women's appropriate place in society. But in those areas, too, there are amazing girls and women demanding change – and able to show the benefits to the whole community of giving women an equal voice."

### Balancing out the boardroom

When asked what a company misses out on by having a gender imbalance at leadership level, Kelly replies: "I think women contribute to a much more 360-degree perspective about how companies operate inside societies. It still tends to be assumed that they will take on the majority of domestic and caring duties at home, so they're generally the ones dealing with the dentists, the doctors, the schools, the care homes, the bus timetables etc. Women can therefore bring the whole community into the boardroom – and, at a time when we're grasping at how to create ethical economic viability, this is invaluable.

"After all, we can't have it both ways – we can't want companies to be the major driver of both our economic policy and our way of thinking about culture, and then negate them from the responsibility of helping to make our →

PHOTOS: THE CORNER SHOP

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societies work. So I think the idea of diversity is about lived experience as well as thought processes.”

**The next steps**

For Kelly, the most pressing issue right now is childcare, which is still one of the greatest barriers to women’s career progression – and, therefore, to entering senior leadership roles.

“I think women are going to have to start designing the way they want to work,” she says. “Instead of being grateful for being invited back after maternity leave – at lower pay, lower status, and therefore with lower pension contributions; all the things that keep women poorer – it’s up to us, along with men, to effect change and say ‘this is what the job should look like’. That will be the game-changer.”

Education and empowerment from an early age are also crucial, and this is where Kelly’s own WOW Festivals play a central role. Indeed, she’s heard from many young women who, as a direct result of attending the under-10s workshops, went on to think about being more equal in their playgrounds, to take part in school councils, and to make informed decisions around higher education.

Adds Kelly: “These women have moved on to become much more integrated into leadership roles at all levels of society. Increasingly, they are also changing the nature of conversations in order to be honest about female experience and how to use power differently.

“Better still, these conversations are being had right across the world, and that makes me feel optimistic, because once you admit something, once you find the words to discuss it, and once you don’t feel alone anymore, I think change starts accelerating.” ■



**UNITING FOR CHANGE**

**International Women’s Day (IWD) is another global event on which the movement comes together. Marked annually on March 8, it has been gathering strength for more than 100 years – so much so that it’s now an official holiday in many countries.**

People around the world join together for celebrations, performances, parades, rallies, conferences, networking events and more. Many global corporations also support IWD by running their own events and campaigns.

**IWD: KEY DATES**

**1909**  
In accordance with a declaration by the Socialist Party of America, the first National Woman’s Day was observed across the US on February 28.

**1910**  
At the second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen, Clara Zetkin (leader of the ‘Women’s Office’ for the Social Democratic Party in Germany) tabled the idea of an International Women’s Day (IWD), which received unanimous approval.

**1911**  
IWD was honoured for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on March 19. More than one million people attended women’s rights rallies.

**1913**  
Russian women observed their first IWD in February. Following discussions, it was then transferred to the now-familiar date of March 8.

**1914**  
More women across Europe held rallies to campaign against the First World War and to express women’s solidarity.

**1975**  
IWD was celebrated for the first time by the United Nations (UN).

**1996**  
The UN commenced the adoption of an annual theme for IWD.

**2001**  
The IWD website was launched to re-energise the day and boost campaign participation.

**2019**  
This year’s campaign theme is **#BalanceforBetter**, a call to action for driving gender balance throughout the world.

**To find out more, visit:**  
[internationalwomensday.com](http://internationalwomensday.com)