

# Why Black Lives Matter isn't up for debate

The coronavirus may be the biggest story of 2020, but it is another tale that has tugged at the hearts of so many of us across the globe. The scope of this issue isn't new, nor is the cause. In fact, it is a fight for equality that spans over several centuries. A cry for justice that in recent months has seen protests take place all over the world - despite the pandemic.

*BLACK LIVES MATTER. No justice, no peace, no racist police. Say his name.*

Only, whose name do we start with? The chants have been uttered, fists raised in the air. Knees have hit the floor on streets, pitches and outside courthouses. Hashtags have trended all over social media, and celebrities and politicians have gotten involved too. Yet still, it is not enough. And while there have been some wins along the way, the fight is far from over. The answer to the question of why Black Lives Matter should ideally be simple, but the issue itself is far from it. To truly understand the complexities of this more modern movement, we must start at the beginning.

## From slavery to segregation

In the same way that we trade food and other consumer goods, so too were humans once sold and traded. Only, this was never a shady black market operation, like we may have expected. On the contrary, the companies running this so-called 'trade' were both well-known and well-respected. Such enterprises even had the backing of monarchs, and between the 16th and 19th centuries an estimated 12 million Africans were captured and transported through the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Fast forward a few hundred years and slavery is finally abolished, but division, mistreatment and exploitation remained. Only this time, it operated under a new name: segregation. This systematic separation of the black and white populations was widely accepted in all areas of daily life, from schools and shops to public transport. Black people were only given the right to vote in the US in 1965. The terrifying reality is that this is all still recent history, and for most of us, the society our grandparents were raised in.

## Understanding institutional racism

The same logic that justified the atrocities of slavery is the one still being used to rationalise police brutality today. It stems from a widespread and, at times, unconscious belief that white skin grants favour, whereas to be black is to automatically be inferior. This racial hierarchy still exists in our current society; it's just gotten really good at hiding within the cracks. After all, institutional racism isn't loud or outspoken. It's covert and cunning, and embedded in the very institutions individuals are expected to depend upon to live.

From poorer quality of education to underfunded housing, to a lack of employment opportunities; these disadvantages naturally make it harder for black and minority communities to not only prosper, but live. Often turning to crime as a last resort in order to survive, it is then these same communities that are racially profiled, face tougher policing and given harsher sentences. Despite only making up 13% of the US population in 2010, the rate at which black people were incarcerated was up to 8 times higher than that of white people. Likewise, the rate at which black Americans are killed by police is

more than twice as high as the rate for white Americans. By this standard, if we were to ask the system why Black Lives Matter, the system would laugh, because the stats clearly show they don't.

## Unpacking the term 'Black Lives Matter'

As the Trump administration continues to cut billions from the sectors that directly help disadvantaged families and people of colour, it is apparent that US politics still fails to grasp even the basics of why Black Lives Matter. Politics and International Relations graduate Georgina Gaber believes 'voting barriers have also left the black community with a limited voice', and so 'public outrage over police brutality has become a microcosm of larger social inequalities faced. This is perhaps the very reason why Black Lives Matter, as a movement, has gained so much traction and support over the years.

However, ironically, one of the biggest complaints others have of the movement is the name of the movement itself. The misconception that admitting 'Black Lives Matter' somehow suggests the lives of non-blacks don't is as ill-informed as it is ignorant. The slogan doesn't demand that *only* Black Lives Matter, rather it tries to emphasise that Black Lives Matter *too*, since the systems of our society work against this very fact. The highly closed-minded retort of 'All Lives Matter' that certain groups use to defend their lack of support is both disappointing and offensive, and fails to recognise the structural oppression and hardships black people face on a daily basis.

## Challenges facing the movement

As a movement, Black Lives Matter has grown incredibly over the years. The untimely passing of George Floyd in May undoubtedly sparked further activism and saw more people join the conversation. However, with more outreach comes further challenges. For instance, media coverage of demonstrations tends to portray protesters as violent, focusing on damages to buildings as opposed to the unity and power displayed by those coming together. British-Pakistani Marketing Events Officer, Aiman Butt described her experience of a protest in London as 'empowering and moving', calling it a 'positive environment [with] music playing' and concluding that 'everyone was chanting [but] people were not violent at all'.

Despite such displays of positivity and passion, the movement remains criticised, and there have still been numerous instances of police and protesters clashing. Could it therefore be possible that the media, law enforcement and even the government have hijacked the narrative of the movement, politicised it even, to keep from having to work towards any real change? The media's cover of looting during protests certainly creates the perfect excuse to then use excessive force against protesters. The same can be seen in individual cases of police brutality, whereby the victim's character is smeared as a way of justifying the brutality they consequently faced. Take the case of Breonna Taylor, and the supposed plea deal her ex-boyfriend was offered to falsely incriminate her, since the circumstances of her death were not enough to justify her brutal killing.

## Fighting for Black Lives in the present

As far as activism goes, protests are only one of the ways people have been showing their support for Black Lives Matter over the last few months. British-Caribbean Masters student Jerome Johnson believes 'activities such as protests and petitions have had a positive effect [and] give other black people the confidence to speak out about personal encounters with racism whether it be by police, in the workplace or just out on the street'. When asked what more could be done to tackle these issues,

he said 'pushing for more psychological reasoning tests for police as part of their training that reflect possible real-life scenarios' is crucial.

Others have used creativity to show support, through music, art and even poetry. Dance group Diversity's recent performance on Britain's Got Talent stands out in particular, as much for its powerful message and moving choreography as for the 24,000 or so complaints received following the performance. Main cause of complaint? The routine supposedly made the show too political. This reaction is as sad as it is telling. We have to ask why Black Lives Matter, as a movement, has become so politicised in the first place, and who gains the most from politicising it? After all, to politicise something is to put it up for debate, something the value of any human life should never be up for. Turning a fight for justice into a political topic therefore only works to polarise us all further.

## Learning to use your privilege

We all have certain privileges, certain advantages granted to us based on the country we live in, the class, race, or gender we're born into, and so on. It is just as important to recognise this, as it is to utilise these advantages and actually do something with the personal privilege you hold. By this definition, the term 'white privilege' therefore refers to the different ways white people benefit from their so-called 'whiteness'. As Bristol-based HR Growth & Development Coordinator Georgie Bryant puts it, 'white privilege doesn't mean a white person cannot have a difficult life, or have been disadvantaged and prejudiced against in some way. It simply means that your life has not been made difficult - in fact it has definitely been made easier - just because of the colour of your skin'.

Georgie is one of many young people in the UK starting to use their voice to advocate for why Black Lives Matter. While 'having friends and family from BAME backgrounds means that [she's] always been aware of racism..to some degree', she admits feeling 'a little ashamed that [she] wasn't doing this much or going out of [her] way to uncover the harsh truths [she's] discovering now', and that her activism has 'mostly increased due to social media exposure and coverage'.

## Other ways to get involved

Though the use of social media as a tool to propel why Black Lives Matter is certainly a good thing, it is equally important to beware of the dangers of performative activism and make sure to continue the fight offline. This can be done in numerous ways, from reading up on racial issues to researching how to tackle your own unconscious cues and biases. Supporting black-owned businesses and charities is another great way to get involved, as is having difficult conversations with family and friends. There are endless resources to make use of, from books and movies, to podcasts and other platforms that share and uplift Black voices and stories.

As Georgie says she's learned over the past few months, 'anti-racism work...is a lifelong commitment. We aren't going to solve this pandemic of racism anytime soon unfortunately, [but] we can not afford to stay silent anymore. If we stay silent, things stay the same'. Racism, anti-semitism, Islamophobia; these are all agents of the same evil. Fighting for fairer social and political policies, and reforming the school curriculum to include the true crimes of colonialism and Empire are just two ways of tackling this evil on a larger scale. To quote Benjamin Franklin, *justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are*, and only once this is all seen and treated as a collective issue, can we start moving towards real change.