

4MNet for the Future

Women living with HIV Reimagining the Future



Femifesto



UK National Network of Peer Mentor Mothers

*The Church says: the body is a sin.
Science says: the body is a machine.
Advertising says: The body is a business.
The Body says: I am a fiesta.*

— *Eduardo Galeano, Walking Words*

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation,
and that is an act of political warfare.*

— *Audre Lorde, A Burst of Light*



The Femifesto emerged from an online creative writing workshop with 4M Mentor Mothers, as part of the National Lottery funded project *4M: Women Living with HIV Re-imagining the Future*. The National Lottery wanted to find out how to help communities move towards recovery and renewal after the impact of COVID-19 and to draw on all the creativity seen in communities and across civil society. Organisations like ours were funded to look at how things are changing, what is needed in this transition, and what is possible in the future. Over 6 months, starting in November 2020, we provided a space for 4M Mentor Mothers to learn and practice creative writing and photography in order to share and reflect upon our visions for better futures post-lockdown.

During the second UK lockdown in early 2021, a time when things were most difficult for many of us, we set to imagine a world in which all the elements we need to be happy, healthy and safe are present. This manifesto emerged in response to a group discussion about the British government's failings in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following document arose out of a question: how can we draw on our experience and expertise, as women living with HIV, as mothers and 4M peer support mentors, to imagine a better public health response?

The photos featured in this booklet were taken by 4M Mentor Mothers after attending our camera phone photography workshop. The photos were taken in response to the prompt: what does happiness look like for you. We created this version of the femifesto for print publication. Another digital version of this booklet, which includes more full colour photos taken by Mentor Mothers as part of the project, is available from the 4M website. The text included in 'Our Demands' and the workshop feedback extracts have been taken verbatim from group discussions held during the online workshops.

September 2021



Charity



Samantha Dawson

4M's Femifesto

We are fantastic. We are fabulous. We are furious. We are so fed up. We see a better future for our children, for ourselves, for you, for all our futures.

We see women's and children's rights at the heart of all policies. We see feminist funding streams re-empowering, reconnecting, re-engaging, reinvigorating us all.

We leave no one behind. We ensure the least powerful are re-sourced, the most listened to and supported, respected and valued for their insights and wisdom built on pain and grief.

We are inclusive. We celebrate all our diversities. We savour the rich wondrous babbel of our sonorous languages and cultures. Our eclecticism is our strength. Our differences are our unity.

In solidarity and sisterhood, we support you all. We women leave no-one behind. We build holistic woman-centred, rights-based, gender equitable futures. We clothe the skeletons in your cupboards, we make sure that ALL the boats stay watertight, sail safely and reach their haven.

We know how much we already do on a voluntary basis and assure you we will squeeze every last drop from Universal Basic Income.

Fantastic fearless feminists — we are on fire, fabulous — and effective.

4M Mentor Mothers Network

Our Demands

A stylized illustration of a raised fist, rendered in shades of orange and white, positioned on the right side of the page. The fist is clenched and pointing upwards, symbolizing solidarity and demand.

Personal and Community Resilience

We have resilience. Connection. Community. Eloquence. Optimism. Determination. A spirit of togetherness. Determination. A Sense of commitment. Passion. Unity. Empathy. We have support for our peers. We're survivors.

We have been developing and sustaining community spaces

We've got the power of peer support. We're there for each other. We have been there. We have the ability to learn from each other. We have our faith. We value each other. We are sisters.

Accurate information and knowledge

We have knowledge. We have learned how important it is to have the right information.

Advocacy

We amplify the voices of those who need us.

Experts by experience

We are specialists. We have the information. If someone needs information, they need to be speaking to us, because we're given information around HIV and shielding. Because they didn't speak with us, they were getting information from the wrong places. We need the government to listen to us, and to listen to science, rather than anything else, in terms of making their policies.

Preventing and addressing stigma

One of the strengths we have, as women living with HIV, is knowledge of stigma and discrimination. In our community, we see a lot of people not wanting to talk about COVID-19. So, we can help to correct people when they say the wrong things that cause stigma.

Women are contributing to prevention work

As women, and as mentor mothers, we are supporting ourselves, and by extension our husbands or children, our families, our communities. In this way, we are doing important prevention work. We need others to recognise and support the work we do — and to set aside community space for us! These spaces are what enable us to provide the support that we do.

Rural area access to community spaces

We need community spaces in different sorts of areas, especially for people who are living in rural areas or areas that don't currently have facilities.

Acknowledge our work and partner with us

Any new policies and new funding streams must acknowledge the work we're already doing, because so much of it goes unrecognised.

We worked in the community for a whole year and no one was thinking about us, for example, whether we needed lateral flow tests to keep safe. It seems like it is part of British Prime minister Boris Johnson's plan that there will always be collateral damage. He's breaking everything up. He's underfunding services. Because it's in his government's interest to keep the power and money with the very few. We think about those health workers who died on the front line, who were so important in the response, and yet whose lives were sacrificed for economic gains or stability.

Make science accessible

It's very important that science is made simple so that people can understand it. That's how myths are dispelled, and the correct information is given to people.

Integrated health and social care peer support

Instead of working in silos, we need a one-stop shop for health and social care peer support.

Investment in the community

Boris and his cronies are not utilising the power of the community. He needs to invest in the community who are educating, engaging, challenging and supporting each other. If he does that, it will actually help the government to achieve what they're aiming for. But the government needs to value everybody and not just the rich people. We need to worry about the rich and the poor alike.

Human rights and migrants

Boris Johnson should read our COVID reports, and see all the issues that we've highlighted there, especially the ones that have to do with migrants. It's also around migrant women knowing what their rights are in terms of access to GPs and treatment.

Digital access

We need to make mobile devices and laptops available to everyone, alongside digital literacy support to access healthcare. It is vital to also retain face to face options for those who are unable to cope with digital tools.

Holistic care and recognition as complete beings

When you go to a consultant, it's all about disease, mental health, HIV, TB, housing, it's about blah blah blah, but none of them is actually seeing us as whole women. It's objectifying us, and therefore, on purpose, keeping us at a distance. And because we're not seen as real people, it's the perfect excuse to exclude us. In their worldview, we don't have a voice, we don't have a spirit, we don't have a perspective, or experience or skills and strengths. We're just a disease. What I think is so powerful about what everyone has been saying here is what Audre Lorde was also saying. We are the ones who actually need to ensure that our collective voices are heard in a holistic way, so that we aren't ripped apart by the process. And putting that fullness in there is a critical part of our message. It reminds me of the brilliant quote by the UN Secretary General — the one who is also really shouting

about the importance of global vaccination – who said that COVID-19 is like an X-ray that exposes all of the problems that already exist in our countries.

We are leaders

Look at the countries where women are in power. They prioritise childcare, mental health, education, rather than industry and economics.

Integrated care

We want mental health services that support domestic violence services.

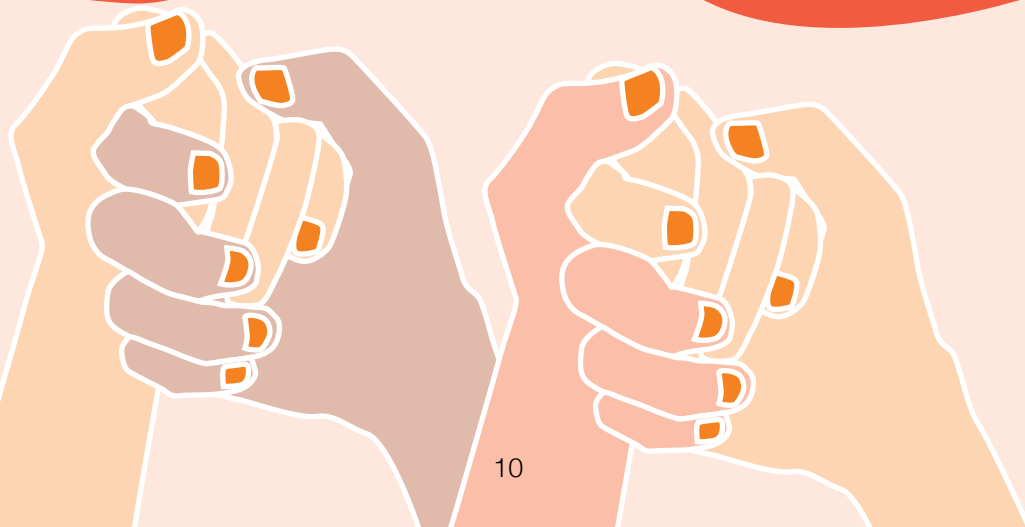
Global access to vaccines

UK must donate vaccines to the global south. We need vaccinations for all.

Make young people a priority

The government needs to look at the youth. So many of the youth are out of work. Some of them may have lost parents. We have areas where disaster funding ignores Youth Services.

When we stand together, we are powerful.



Our intention is to work together as a sisterhood supporting the rights and voices of women living with HIV, through the pregnancy and motherhood.

To work in solidarity.

To challenge policies that ignore our needs and rights.

To continue to empower through peer support and lived experience other women who are disadvantaged.

OUR BODIES, OUR DECISION

WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED

UNTIL WE ARE HEARD

Neo

Let's embrace our Perfect Imperfections and make our better futures happen

Nomusa

We want to see three things:

- 1. Health Equality for every individual*
- 2. Allow us to realise our unlimited potential*
- 3. Compassion and humanity*

Husseina

We need to move beyond stigma. The judgment of others needs to stop. As women, we must be there for one another, for yourself, for ourselves.

We need more education and equal opportunities in everything. But we don't want to have to fight for things.

We need acceptance of all our difference and beauty. We need to be self-confident as women leaders doing better in the COVID-19 response – as happy, resilient people.

When we value ourselves, it touches other people: self-confidence oozes out of us. We must keep re-imagining ourselves to recognise how special we are.

We must keep using our journey to make a massive difference.

We need faith in each other.

Angelina

Help women to support each other. We need a way that can connect women locally, perhaps using their postcodes. This could be a contact buddy that will check on you regularly.

We need more support for mums who have been directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We need bereavement and financial support.

During the pandemic, many children could not access internet or had no laptop

at home. The government should introduce free Wi-Fi for all families with children in full-time education.

Estelle

See us – acknowledge the work we do

Value us – pay us for it, we can teach you, we are worthy.

Empower us – provide safe spaces for us to find and strengthen our voices

A better response would be: equitable.

It would work with all communities.

It would value all voices, happiness and mental health.

It would combine social care, housing and food with health care.

It would be a grassroots and bottom-up approach.

Listen to what people want and need to live well, and then provide it. Don't just ignore or deny it.

A better response would recognise our basic human needs of safety, security, shelter, as well as CHOICE.

Choice should not be a luxury of just the wealthy, we are all unique, deserving and we can all flourish when given options. There are the resources to help everyone. These can be shared for the benefit of all societies, all humanity, the planet - our home!

A good response to any future catastrophe, needs to have at its heart: integration, intergenerational approaches and an awareness of our interconnection and interdependence.

This can be achieved with International Women.

Because we understand that BEING HUMAN in this time, means

WE DO NOT HAVE SINGLE ISSUE LIVES.

If we are living, we are complex and that is our beauty and our right.

WE can solve, create, love and fight, but what we need as a response is to unite.

Mel



Mem



Faida

What Mentor Mothers took away from the session

"I can't believe how much wealth and resource and strength there is here, and what we've achieved together in this short space of time. These sessions are a form of self-care for me".

"Behind every successful woman there is a tribe of successful women who have her back. I do get imposter syndrome all the time, especially now that I'm more active on clinical forums, sometimes feeling out of my depth. But then I come to something like this and I think: No, I do belong".

"I've always felt imposter syndrome. But I don't feel that when I'm part of this group. I feel that it's the sisterhood and I'm part of something".

"This is the essence of peer support. I can feel tingles going through me as I say this because it's just so brilliant. I live in a very rural area. I don't have a local peer support group. I just have this. I appreciate all of you so much, being in this together, and all of the inspiring stuff to listen to. I'm taking away a huge sense of joy and peace and excitement".

"It's been thought-provoking, inspiring and informative. It reminds me why I'm a Mentor Mother. It validates the reasons that I'm doing mentoring".

"Throughout this session, I've been thinking about a lady I spoke to today. She's in a place where she thinks she is all by herself. She's lost, nobody wants to help her. The government doesn't want to help her. Her children are in a refugee camp and suffering. Her immigration claim has left her in limbo, she cannot do anything to help herself. That was my last conversation before I came to this meeting. I was feeling overwhelmed. I'm taking away that I have this support. Even though it feels like I could not help the situation. But something is happening. And we are all in this together".

“I look at the amazing resources among us. The creativity, the energy, the power. And I’m very proud to be part of this. One of the biggest lessons I’m taking away is the focus on self-care because I haven’t been very good at looking after myself recently, which can actually lead to a lot of repercussions”.

“I have somewhere I can go in good times, in bad times, and we can laugh together”.

Acknowledgements

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4M Mentor Mothers Network CIC
c/o STOPAIDS, Mainyard Studios, Office B 90 Wallis Rd, Hackney Wick London,
E9 5LN
Registered CIC Number 12097907
Website: <https://4mmm.org>
Twitter: @4Mproject

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