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Research question- How does feminist theory and visual culture expose and challenge the historical invisibility of women within art, photography, politics and data representation?

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DECLARATION I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Abstract:

Within this essay it'll be focusing on the different collective data around the invisibility of women; using this data will help to understand the gender bias within the subject of historical data, politics, contemporary art, and theory. By using different artists and photographers being backed by feminist theory to back up the body of this essay.

Introduction:

This essay examines on how the invisibility of women within visual culture, data and the representation of women in general is an issue within today's society. It will be structured round how feminist theory, art and photography can intertwine with each other especially when it comes to the representation. So, by researching into historical data of women to demonstrate how we aren't always shown in the same light as men. The aim is to show how women are

seen within art and photography but also show how women are underrepresented as well as invisible in politics, medical research and history.

Within the context of art, photography and history this question is relevant when discussing 'Invisible women, Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men' but when it comes to discussing historical data there is a gender bias. In this work I hope to use images and historical context to demonstrate how culture and academia are more focused on collecting data on the evolution of men than women.

To illustrate my ideas I hope to use a series of images and contribute different arguments by feminist theory writers such as Laura Bates who use statistics from different women to not only to make sure that they have a voice but shows how feminism is truly needed even in the 21st century within her book everyday sexism '*The flashes of realization and first, painful moments of learning a woman's place.*' (Page 83, Bates, 2016) by using this book it will give me a broader understanding of statistics and how women feel about how society see's and represent them.

Feminist fiction also has added a different perspective within this essay and the novel 'the handmaid's tale' by Margret Atwood that was written in the mid 80s which depicts a dystopian future where certain parts are echoing in our present, Atwood while writing the handmaid's tale used research about how women were seen in other cultures but also how they were treated to structure the book. By using this book but also using feminist theory it will give me a greater understanding of different ways that writers see how women are seen but also represented. While being interviewed when the book came out Atwood told the interviewer that the handmaids tell shows a reflection of the present climate of the world as well as being a dystopian novel.

In my own practice I use multimedia techniques similar to Rachel Jablo ‘the hysteria project’ that gives women a chance to tell the story through an artistic practice, within my own practise I want to be able to challenge how women are represented within photography and art by using these techniques I’m giving the audience a glimpse of how I see women should be represented not just seen as an object but people that have been through.

Historical and theoretical:

‘All are evolutionary products of the success of hunting adaptation’, what does that mean for women for women’s humanity? If human evolution is driven by men are women even human?



Figure 1

When researching into cave paintings of women I came across an article that showed that not all cave paintings were done by men, they were predominantly done by women due to the hand structure of their male counterpart.

Cave paintings, for example, are often of game animals and so researchers have assumed they were done by men – the hunters. But new analysis of handprints that

appear alongside such paintings in cave sites in France and Spain has suggested that the majority were actually done by women.

Within the book *invisible women* (2019) Caroline Criado Perez writes about the male and female statistics that show how women are underrepresented in society especially when it comes to historic data and art works within the ice age era. When looking into the historical data women are only seen as bodies that could have children but when reading Perez's book 'invisible women' there is most definitely a gender bias when it comes to historical research where data only focuses on if a man created what they found not a woman. Within the figure one the handprint is significant to historical data but as was said in the article by national geographic they can't truly know if they were painted by a woman or a man because they weren't there so instead of taking time to take accurate measurements, they automatically assume male.

In an article by national geographic that talks about the handprints, there is some research that suggests 'the palm-to-thumb ratio of the hand prints and concluded they mostly belonged to teenage boys, who, he told *NatGeo*, often drew their two favourite topics: big powerful animals and naked ladies.' (Nuwer, 2013)



Figure 2

While we have historical art work to help us better understand the past and the invisibility there is a different way through imagery that can lead towards how the invisibility of women with art and history can be seen, Celine Bodin a French photographer that photographed the series 'light of grace' the series itself '*explores female representation's conflict with ideals and beauty archetypes.*' (Genesis Imaging, 2020) Within these images it may just be seen as an out of focus image of women, but Bodin shows that there is deeper meaning behind them where how women are seen out of focus when it comes to historical data and only seen as an aesthetic. Within most visual culture when women are seen in the naked form, but Bodin chose to have her model out focus taking away the visual aspect of the women being completely naked. In *Everyday sexism* (2016) Lara Bates shows how women are seen but not heard when it comes to issues within today's society but the same can be said about visual culture where women were only seen as objects and not human. Women within historical data and visual culture aren't seen as much as our male counterpart '*Disbelief is the great silencer*' (page 25 Bates, 2016) where there is some disbelief in how women in history weren't just cooks, cleaners and mothers but because of the bias in data women are overshadowed by men. In the book *invisible women* Perez contradicts the bias of how women are seen in historical data.

'Not consistent with what we know about the sex ratios of extant human populations. And given Viking women could own property, could inherit and could become powerful merchants, is it so impossible that they could have fought too?

Because women within history were written off as the gatherers within society it seen to some historians that women did not fight Perez also contradicts quote within her own writing about Viking burial tradition. '*DNA testing of skeletons buried with weapons in more than 1,000*

Scythian burial mounds from Ukraine to Central Asia have revealed that up to 37% of Scythian women and girls were active warriors. ' (Criado Perez, 2019) these statistics show that women weren't just the gatherers and domestic workers in some societies but also seen as warriors.



Figure 3

The *birth of Venus* is a depiction of 'ancient Roman belief system, conveying Italy's admiration for the Roman empire' (Anon, n.d.) within the renaissance women are painted in a way of admiration of the female figure but also on the other hand it can be seen as being sexualized which is a huge issue within today's society where women and young girls are either over sexualized or when it comes to issues that happens to women they are invisible.

This is where we question if women are truly invisible within art why are they painted? On one hand it can be seen as admiring the beauty of women or women's beauty being sexualised for the male gaze.

Laura Bates first chapter of the book *everyday sexism* (2016) Silenced women: The invisible problem, within everyday sexism Bates uses tweets that have been sent to the everyday sexism 'I tried to tell family about harassment or assault, but they'd almost always imply I'd done something to make it happen' (Bates, 2016) To even imply that as a woman that you did

something to bring on being harassed or assaulted truly shows that women's issues are seen as invisible.



Figure 4

Within figure 4 is a painting called 'now you see us' painted by a female artist between 1520-1920 shown in the Tate the stark difference between the women and the man interacting shows how it was like for women during the Victorian era within an article by the Guardian

it shows that it was a '*male-dominated society, women were practically invisible, except in the home, and not taken seriously as professionals*' (Hessel, 2024). When analysing this article, it depicts that women if they were to become artists, they weren't allowed to study the nude but after 20 years of campaigning they were permitted by the royal academy.

Within the same article it shows that women were truly not seen in the same light as men but lesser a quote taken from a Victorian art critic.

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender [...] But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation

This shows that even when speaking about the intellect of a woman it makes us invisible because of the nature of the quote by saying that women's minds weren't made for battle, invention or creation shows how women were and are seen as lesser than their male counterpart within society but also shows how relevant the question of women being invisible with art and history.

Political and theoretical



Figure 5

Laura Bates takes different accounts from women and girls about their experiences with sexism, in the chapter *women in politics* there is an account of a girl's experience in A level politics.

I took A level politics [...] I had worked hard to prepare for a debate in which I was the only female in my team. While providing a counterargument my teacher stopped me and asked the males in my team whether they were going to let a woman do all the talking.

Bates gives women a chance to have a voice about subjects that women may feel like their invisible in especially politics, when it comes to studying politics in further education it's seen as a struggle for girls "*oh you're taking politics course? You must be very smart, things like that are really hard for girls*" (Bates, 2016)

When exploring different pivotal historical events for women, the *Suffragette movement* fought to bring about change in a culture in which only men were allowed to vote. Between 1903 and 1914 the suffragettes used attention grabbing protests to be seen and not to be an invisible part of society and gain the vote.

When it came to the suffrage movement there was two sides of the same coin where there were the suffragettes and the suffragists. The suffragists used more peaceful means to get the vote where the suffragettes used more violent means to get their views across like smashing windows, but when it comes to the history books the suffragettes are the ones that are more noticed because of the methods by which they were attempting to get the vote but why are schools only focusing on teaching students about the women that used peaceful means to get there point across? Are they trying to show young girls that the political field isn't made for them to enforce the belief that women are weaker and should not be listened too?



Figure 6

In this image Civil rights lawyer Elizabeth White screams "*no justice, no peace.*" Showing the impact the repeal of *roe v wade* had on women arguing there is no peace for women especially when it comes to women's reproductive care in politics. Perez states in 'invisible women' that the lack of data is harming women's rights '*gender data gaps in government thinking, and the result is government produce male-biased policy that is harming women.*'

The repeal of this law was a pivotal moment for women but in the completely wrong direction on Friday 26th June 2022 when the supreme court overturned *Roe v Wade* the right to have the choice to have an abortion was largely removed when fifty years before in 1973 *Roe v Wade* was put into place so that women had the right to choose what they do with their own bodies. after the overturn of *Roe v Wade* there was a mixed reaction from American society including politicians from the democrat and republican party.

HOUSE SPEAKER NANCY PELOSI, A DEMOCRAT, IN A STATEMENT: "*This cruel ruling is outrageous and heart-wrenching. But make no mistake: the rights of women and all Americans are on the ballot this November.*" (Reuters, 2022)

SENATE REPUBLICAN LEADER MITCH MCCONNELL said in A STATEMENT:

"This is an historic victory for the Constitution and for the most vulnerable in our society."

(The decision is) "courageous and correct." (Reuters, 2022)

The decision to overturn Roe v Wade by the supreme court was seen as '*wrong, extreme and out of touch*' (Glenza, Pengelly and Levin, 2022) Said by the former American president Joe Biden. many major decisions about women throughout history have been exclusively discussed by men and imposed on women the overturning of Roe v Wade is an example of such a decision made by men but has only affected women. When it comes to after the abortion ban was put into place according to an article by the BBC.

Researchers estimate there were 478 infant deaths across 14 states which have outright bans or heavy restrictions - which they say would not have occurred had the laws not been in place.

Even though the BBC has been questioned by some as a reliable source of information, throughout the article it stayed consistent with the narrative of the spike in infant deaths across several states. but this article doesn't mention how women's deaths have also spiked due to the overturn of Roe v Wade.



Figure 7

At the beginning of 2025 the name Adriana Smith hit the news. Adriana Smith was decreed brain dead but due to being pregnant she was kept on life support to keep the baby alive due to the abortion ban in 2022.

After the media spoke to the family of Adriana Smith, they told the media *'We didn't have a choice or a say about it,'* Newkirk said. *"We want the baby. That's a part of my daughter. But the decision should have been left to us – not the state."* (Sherman, 2025) the state control over what happens to Adriana's body instead of her family illustrates how much societies see women as invisible or even just a body that can have children.

This issue is discussed in the handmaid's tale from season 3 episode 9 (Heroic) which shows a similar case to Adriana Smith and the comparison has been picked up in mass media for example within an article by metro that says that *'we're living in the handmaid's tale'* where a character is declared brain dead but kept alive because she is seen as only property but because this episode was brought out in 2019 its not necessarily connected to the Adriana Smith case due to the episode coming out six years before the Adriana case. Even before Adriana

smith's case there were two other cases which have reached the media Marliese Munoz (Texas, 2014) and Florida case (2023) but a lot like the Adriana Smith case these are no longer spoken about. after Adriana Smith's child was 'born' the whole case was swept under the rug by the state. their names aren't spoken which makes it look like they have become invisible in the eyes of society.

Judith Butler states within her book gender trouble (Butler, 1990) that women are seen as political subjects when it comes to representation in politics.

representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is ; assumed to be true about the category of women.

Butler analyses the issue of how women are represented especially within the subject of politics. She argues that women are the subject of political matters or they are completely invisible from the subject itself. By examining when women become the subject of politics, she shows that the only time they do become the subject it isn't always in their favour, especially when it comes to reproductive rights. women themselves become completely invisible from it we only think of them in terms of just their bodies. Butler has also argued that *'women's lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all.'* (Butler, 1990)

In 2024 domestic violence against women and girls was declared as a national emergency in the UK reported by National Police Chiefs' Council due to the rise in violence against women Joanna Moorcroft reported that *'Violence in the workplace, rape, violent assault, honour killings, forced pregnancy, women's right to choose. ... are all continuing to rise,'* (Cullen, 2025) showing that in a society where crimes against women were being brought in to the light as the violence against women is still growing in 2025 were there is less coverage on violence

against women. The question is how long women will stay visible to the government until they move to a different subject.

The national police chiefs council have also described the violence against women and girls as an epidemic in recent years where *'3,000 offences recorded each day, 1 in 12 women victims each year'* (NPCC, 2024) without research or keeping up to date with these issues society wouldn't focus on this subject matter.

Contemporary and theory

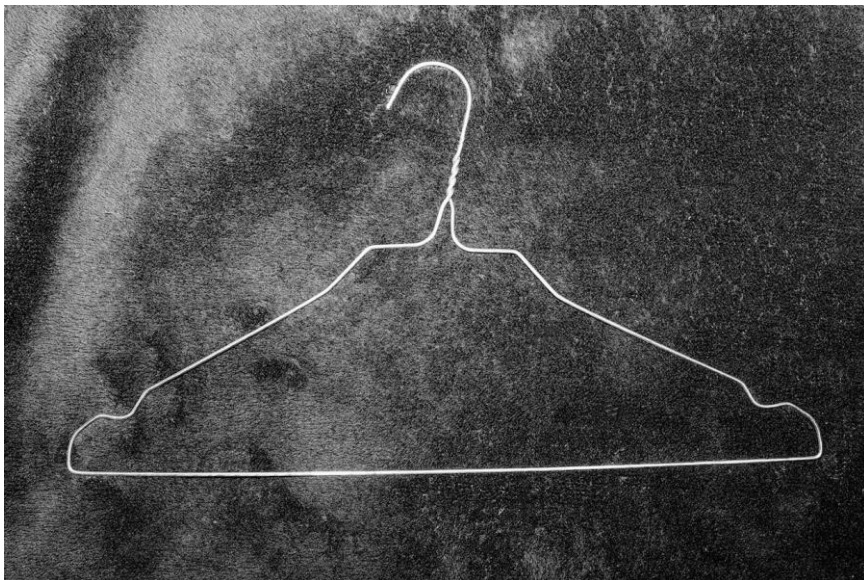


Figure 8

Laia Abril's work *'On abortion'* shows through visual and statistical means how botched abortions are killing women due to *'law and social coercion'* forcing women to have unwanted pregnancies causing their deaths. Abril's work through different kinds of mixed media; visual, audio and textual evidence confronts questions of moral judgement, this also sparks the question of why women are seen as invisible within contemporary art and photography as well as politics Abril's states that her work *'reveals a staggering series of social triggers, stigmas, and taboos around abortion that have long remained invisible.'* (Abril, 2016)

Diana Nicholette Jeon writes about an article she came across where it states '*Why Female Photographers Still Mimic the Male Gaze*' within her own article she states how she's in full disagreement with the author which is completely understandable as a female practitioner but even in her own mind she believes that within the photographer scape there's been a huge shift in female photographers making their mark within society.

"Is there something more, something else, something different, that separates how and what women photograph?"

This quote within the article sparks the question within the question if a female photographer is seen as mimicking the male gaze, then why are female photographers less acknowledged than male photographers if female photographers are mimicking the 'male gaze'. Within my own practice I do find myself photographing the female figure but not in the male gaze nor the female gaze, I prefer to appease neither gaze.



Figure 9

The invisibility of women doesn't just bleed into art and culture it also effects how women are treated in a reproductive health setting. Emma Bennison student at Falmouth university structured her works around endo after being told that the pain that she was feeling wasn't real Bennison draws on experiences in her own,

life living with endometriosis and PCOS). I wanted to highlight the failings in women's healthcare and raise awareness of endometriosis by sharing my journey of getting a diagnosis, and the ongoing medical treatment after my surgeries

By using her own body as the canvas she's able to show the reproductive health condition endometriosis a condition that effects many women but about '20–25% of people with endometriosis have "silent endometriosis" (What is endometriosis? — (What is endometriosis? — Vagina Museum, 2019b) When analysing more closely into endometriosis itself there have been historical accounts where women were written off as having '*Wandering womb. This evolved into the disease known as "hysteria".*' This was due to the lack of understanding of the female body. This issue is still relevant in modern times where often women are invisible even when going to the doctors if there in pain while on their period because of the pain not being 'real' or it just being all in 'your head'.

Perez the writer of 'invisible women' takes personal accounts similar to Bates work writing about women's experience with going to the doctors. Perez writes about the story of Michelle who suffered from pain that male doctors told her was all in her own head. Only when she consulted a female GP was she able to get somewhere.

At the age of twenty-six Michelle was referred to a female GP who scheduled her for a colonoscopy: it was revealed that the entire left side of her colon was diseased. She was diagnosed with both irritable bowel syndrome and ulcerative colitis. 'Funnily enough', Michelle says, 'my colon is not in my head'.

A basic analysis shows that until it comes to something that is life changing and disruptive women can be invisible to medical treatments because of the lack of medical research on female bodies unlike are male counterparts.

A 2008 analysis of a range of textbooks recommended by twenty of the ‘most prestigious universities in Europe, the United States and Canada’ revealed that across 16,329 images, male bodies were used three times as often as female bodies to illustrate ‘neutral body parts.

showing the male body and female body as neutral body parts proves that there is not as much focus on female disease like endo and PCOS if medical students aren't seeing these diseases they aren't acknowledged within medical practice. This makes women even more invisible because of the female anatomy becoming hidden when studying medicine.

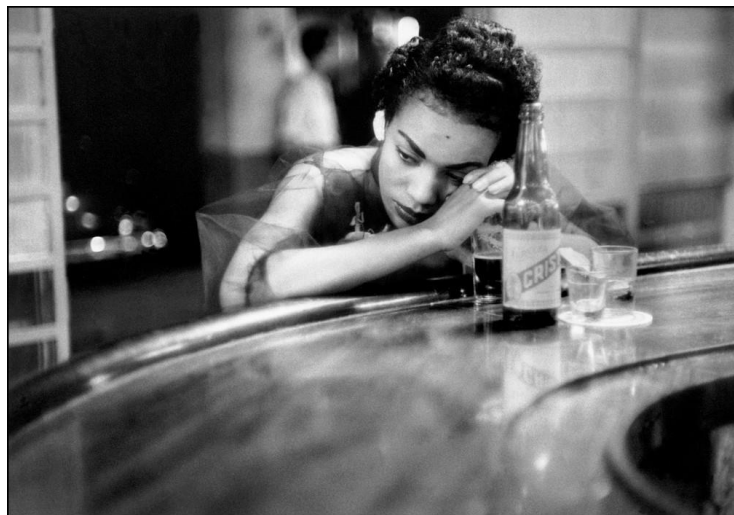


Figure 10

Simone De Beauvoir writer of the second sex (De Beauvoir, 1949) wrote about the different characteristics of women that can be linked to contemporary arts , ‘*woman clings to routine, time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to*

repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past' when you look at this quote from a modern stand point, women within the art and photography industry are over shadowed by our male counterparts. Magnum photography is a strong example of this. The first woman to join magnum photography was Eve Arnold, she became a member in 1951 but not an official member until 1957.

Arnold's 'the unretouched woman' her first book that looked at '*experience of being a woman, through a woman's lens*' shows a different outlook into women's lives through the eyes of a woman showing through expansive raw imagery without sexualising them unlike the male gaze did during the 70s. But this book also raised the questions '*around the barriers that lay between women and their actualization as artists, photojournalists and professionals, both in the 20th Century and now.*' (Magnum Photos, 2016) which shows the question of why women are having to question working within an industry a personal account by Arnold,

I was looked on as someone apart—a "career lady," a "woman photographer." My colleagues were not spoken of in inverted commas; they were not "career men" or "men photographers". I was not happy about it but realized as have women before me that it was a fundamental part of female survival to play the assigned role. I could not fight against those attitudes. I needed to know more about other women to try to understand what made me acquiesce in this situation.

After analysing this, Arnold even within her own field felt like she was invisible but to be able to work against this she had to understand women in her day to day.

Within the works of Perez it states that Ireland and Iceland are the two countries with the most gender equality in the world and Iceland has been described as 'best country to be a working woman' but Perez also states that

While this is of course something to celebrate, there is also a reason to take issue with The Economist's phrasing because if Iceland's description does anything it is surely to expose the term 'working woman' as a tautology

By using the word '*tautology*' the author demonstrates that there is always a fault with language that shows even if women are in a working position they will never be seen in the same way as men.



Figure 10

When it comes to the true invisibility of women, the subject of rape and sexual assault is a subject within society that people want and for some reason need to shut out even when it comes to female victims coming forward to tell their story or to get justice. Laia Abril's long-term series 'history of *Misogyny*' within the second chapter on rape focuses on the '*institutional rape throughout a series of conceptual portraits that, together with testimonials symbolise the different systemic rape cultures.*' (Abril, n.d.)

Within the book everyday sexism Laura Bates includes the shocking statistics of the small number of victims who come forward, '*only 15 percent of female victims of the most serious*

sexual offences reported it to police' (Bates, 2016) The question that we should be asking ourselves is why are women not coming forward if they have been sexually assaulted? Is it because society made them feel invisible and not heard? Everyday sexism first chapter 'silenced women: the invisible problem' shows how women are truly not listened to within society, '*I was raped by 2 men at the age of 14 and my family normalized it by ignoring it... I was confused ... I was sure it was wrong.*' Twitter.

An example of this is the issues brought up by the lack of separate bathrooms for women who are escaping war and conflict. Perez states that when it comes to gender neutral bathrooms women are more likely to be sexually assaulted if there aren't separate bathrooms.

Research by the Women's Refugee Commission has found that women and girls in accommodation centres in Germany and Sweden are vulnerable to rape, assault and other violence because of a failure to provide separate latrines, shower facilities or sleeping quarters.

Knowing and understanding that women and girls are more vulnerable to being sexually assaulted due to the lack of safety measures put into place by the government's does show that women's and girls' safety isn't their priority. Where the safety of women should be there priority so that the percentage of women being sexually assaulted doesn't become higher as it has been in recent years.

Conclusion:

The invisibility of women isn't seen as an issue within society as well as in arts and photography, but women aren't taken as seriously as men seen with data across different feminist theorists. Questioning if women are invisible within society within the arts, photography, historical data and politics has a huge relevance because of the under amount of research there is on women. after analysing different feminist theorist, they all come out with

the same conclusion that women within society are seen as invisible but have all used their platform to speak out against this issue.

Within the historical context of women being invisible it shows that there has been less research done to understand the timeline of female evolution than male evolution where Perez states in invisible women *'All are evolutionary products of the success of hunting adaptation'*, *what does that mean for women for women's humanity? If human evolution is driven by men are women even human?* Where we do not truly know if women hunted and gathered not just bore children. We have a lack of material on the evolution of women apart from cave paintings that don't show us enough information so it gets written that they were done by a man.

When it comes to the subject of politics there has always been the separation of women and men where when men are in power, they make the laws to the benefit of other men. On the other hand, having violence against women and girls classed as a national emergency and epidemic being a visible issue within society does make women feel less invisible. But I cannot say the same for the United States where they have gone several steps back with women's reproductive rights where there has been a higher mortality rate after the ban was put in place, where Tulane University states *'restrictions on state Medicaid funding for abortion was associated with a 29% higher total maternal mortality'* (Tulane University, 2021)

Analysing women in the art world, women like Eve Arnold had to fight for their right to be visible in the world when it came to joining something like Magnum Photography where it was mainly men until, she officially joined in 1957 even then she still had to fight for her visibility within photography but she did this by photographing women that were seen as invisible within society through the eyes of a woman the "female gaze" without being seen as mimicking the "male gaze".

Within my conclusion the question ‘*How does feminist theory and visual culture expose and challenge the historical invisibility of women within art, photography, politics and data representation?*’ is a relevant question to ask as a photographer because of the visibility and invisibility of women within society not just in the arts and photography but also politics, and data representation because of the less data on women in recent years. In contrast to my own practice I use this question constantly with my works so that i have a greater understanding of the kind of work i want to bring forward and the subjects. As a female photographer I have faced the question within my own practice and i want my work to reflect it so that women aren't seen as invisible but visible within today's society not silenced and only seen as ‘*the invisible problem*’ stated by Laura Bates everyday sexism.

Perez stated at the end of invisible women that ‘*closing the gender data gap will not magically fix all the problems faced by women*’ where that i do agree with this statement but i do believe that there should be more data on women within historical data, politics and the arts in general so women aren't seen as invisible within society.

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