

THE WELLNESS INDUSTRY IS GASLIGHTING YOU & THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT CAPITALISM WANTS

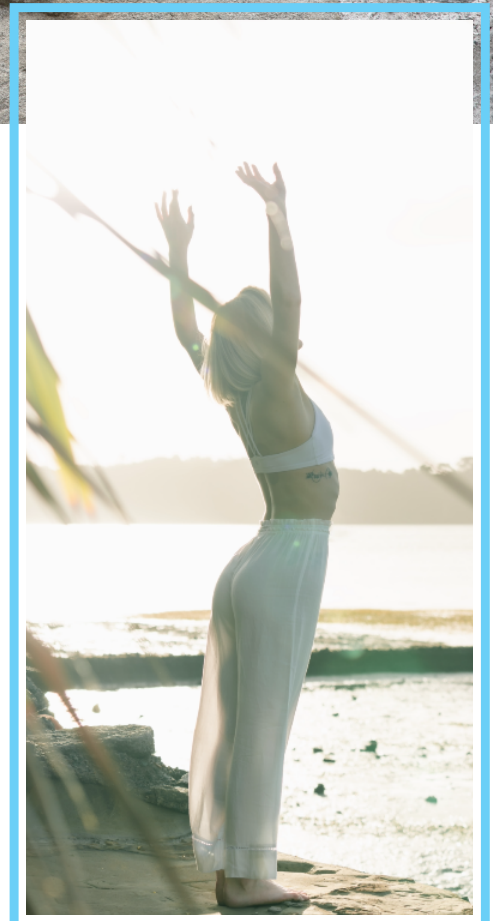
CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN GLOBAL HEALTH | FEBRUARY 2020



[Image Source](#)

Self-care and wellness, from the perspective of [Audre Lorde](#), is an act of survival. She wrote in [A Burst of Light](#) that **“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence...it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”** Self-care by Lorde’s definition is internal and personal; it stays engaged in the political by [sustaining the capacity](#) to engage. The act itself is removed from the system and is an internal, individual practice.

Lorde’s commentary on wellbeing and wellness contrasts sharply with the given image of contemporary wellness. You say “wellness industry” and the images that come to mind are [superfood smoothies](#), [Goop](#), and thin [white bodies](#) in [designer athleisure](#). Holding the idea that humans deserve to feel and be well physically, mentally, and spiritually as an [innate human right](#), not a privilege, is inherently anti-capitalist. But that **notion has been commodified into a 4 trillion dollar industry**, and placed into a hierarchy by a classist neoliberal system.



[Image Source](#)

The popularity of wellness and the shift of a wellness mentality into the mainstream has impacted consumer consciousness and health motivated behaviour. There is a presented 'goal' at the core of every advertised product, however filtered and edited it may be. We all know what these wellness goals look like: exercising regularly (and fashionably), sleeping 8 hours, local and organic fruit and veg, etcetera, etcetera but what the wellness industry excludes from their narrative is **the amount of privilege required to achieve this 'standard'**.

The wellness industry creates **new products and new economies to cope with existing social problems, without in fact targeting or addressing the reasons why we suffer.** Did you know the sleep economy is estimated to be worth around £40 billion?

Its booming growth has been attributed to a shift in the current culture regarding sleep and rest. Whereas before you might have heard bragging about functioning on 4 hours sleep (Donald Trump's preferred schedule), current culture tells "people to care about sleep and treat it like wellness".

But where is the dialogue and outrage addressing the social and economic reasons for why people lose sleep or don't have time for a full sleep? Sure, you can buy a sleep robot that will calm your anxiety and get you snoozing faster for £550, but honestly isn't that a bit dystopian? You'd imagine there should be some questioning of a system that presents a **robot to help us calm down and get to sleep as a reasonable coping strategy.**



Image Source

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You can follow the shifts in cultural narrative and economies through the successes of sectors in the wellness industry. There is **greater value being placed on previously disregarded or dismissed concepts like self-care, human connection, and sustainable eating;** the change in popular social values has demanded a response from schools and workplaces, prompting new emphasis on concepts like "corporate wellbeing".

But corporate wellbeing falls prey to the same dystopian scenario as the sleep robot. One employee at a tech firm commented that the free arepas and afternoon yoga at his workplace often feel like "**...indulgent bribes to make up for the demanding expectations.**" One of my friends working in investment banking told me that the company pays for late food deliveries, for when you're still crunching numbers at 10 pm.

These campaigns aren't supportive of wellness; they are **employee perks being veiled as wellbeing initiatives.** But that's is the point of them. These perks - little pick-me-ups - are acceptable within the parameters set by the wellness industry today. They're fun! They're sexy! **They distract, to an extent, from the real issues. Which often are experienced at their most painful by those who need structural support the most.** A former chef at a wellness retreat centre described employee perks like discounted spa treatments, private nutritionist sessions, and free access to the gym. But when they were **hospitalized for three weeks following a bipolar disorder crisis, they were fired for missing too much work.**



[Image Source](#)

The point of corporate wellbeing is to improve workplace performance. Yes, the vision can be there – Who doesn't love freebies! They make us happy! – but it's a **superficial cover to a more ominous structural issue.**

It's easier to provide on-tap kombucha and massage days than a comprehensive employee health coverage scheme that accounts for 'life in capitalism'.

How do you address employee burn-out? How do you support employees with chronic conditions who may need more paid time off than others?

These questions require **re-thinking how we approach work, and how workplaces approach wellbeing.** But when the wellness industry can come up with a new product for the ill, it's easier to just offer the free Fitbit.

The argument that capitalism will always find a way to sell us the solution to the problem it created feels reductive. Which should 1) make us mad 2) concern us in that something cyclical is occurring. Like so much of global and public health, the challenge comes down to addressing "the causes of the causes" - the deep, structural issues and entrenched power dynamics.



Image by [Casa La Serena](#) via [Open Global Rights](#): Activists at Casa La Serena, a space dedicated to self-care & wellbeing for women activists

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The cultural narrative surrounding wellness continues to shift; people see valuing their wellbeing and happiness as increasingly accepted and desired. But this awakening needs to be applied critically and structurally. The wellness industry, as it is now, functions to sell us a goal that will never be attainable. That's the nature of capitalism – it keeps you wanting more so that you will, in turn, buy more.

Which is why Audre Lorde wellness is the response we need. It is wellness that is intersectional and actively, critically engaged but beyond that, it is **self-preservation within a system that continues to try to externalize what is an internal motivation and worth**. The idea that we deserve to live in personal fulfilment, health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual), and meaningful connection within our communities and environment is inherently counter to capitalist reward (power and hierarchy, arguably).

If wellness is branded as an external goal that can only be fulfilled by the system that fundamentally opposes its achievement, we're fighting a losing battle. Capitalism gaslights us into thinking that these goals are unreasonable. It is through **internalizing the fact that we deserve to live in a system that supports the achievement of these standards** – a system that supports humans, not humans supporting profit – that we strengthen our response, argument, and ability towards change.

What now? Speak your piece below.