

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

JULY 2020

UPDATE



INFORMATION GATHERED THROUGH;

BLOG POSTS WRITTEN BY WOMEN ACROSS SCOTLAND FOR
SWC'S 'EXPERIENCES OF 2020' BLOG PROJECT

Overview

Throughout June, a number of women from communities across Scotland contributed to the SWC's 'Experiences of 2020' rolling blog. This platform will voice how the Coronavirus pandemic is affecting them; their family, relationships, work, education, home life, mental health, wellbeing, and many more aspects of life. The stories will allow the SWC to give evidence to decision makers at all levels, ensuring women's experiences are focussed on throughout the Coronavirus response.

This ongoing project has shown that while every woman's circumstances are unique, their challenges are often shared by many others. "We are in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat."

Health & Healthcare

Women's majority position across health and social care continues to be an ongoing concern. If there is to be another spike in COVID-19 coming into winter, adequate infrastructure and protection will be needed across this sector.

"Women are the majority of nurses and carers, who are catching covid-19 because of poor PPE."

Women who contracted the virus suffer a number of indirect (secondary) mental and physical health impacts. Extensive periods of time spent resting and recovering at home, with minimal exercise, has led to low moods and other mental health difficulties, as well as weight gain and loss of fitness.

Families who have experienced COVID-19 directly have found it incredibly challenging to balance all needs in the household, due to many restrictions on external support. One woman whose husband contracted the virus told us, *"The reality of working from home, helping my kids with their schoolwork, cooking, cleaning and caring was hard going."*

Mental Health

It has been widely established that the pandemic will have severe and widespread negative impacts on mental health. The true extent of this damage is only now becoming apparent. Many women are having their first experiences with poor mental health, and further, feel guilt pursuing help from the NHS at this time.

"It seems that my body had been struggling to come to terms with what is truly an unprecedented time. My attempt at masking the stress by keeping occupied was ineffective."

"The stress had been exasperated by seeing the news everywhere, monitoring the fast-rising death toll, mourning the loss of each individual, worrying about family, worrying about the future, worrying about the present, reminiscing on the past and realising that there is no quick fix to this invisible enemy."

“I am concerned about the women in my life... It’s been a balance for us all; working from home, furloughed, redundant, home schooling, keyworkers, caring for elders, volunteers. No one has had an easy time.”

Many women continue to miss the small conversations throughout each day. Despite the gradual easing of lockdown, the serious impacts of loneliness and lack of social interactions should still be a focus.

“I forgot the snippets of conversation you have with staff in the shops (I haven't been to a shop since March), or the friendly staff in our local cafe chatting to me and my youngest, or hearing about school from my 5 year old, or taking my 13 year old out to his groups.”

“I sometimes felt a bit lonely and isolated before but this has definitely been amplified in lockdown. I think as mums we’re so busy thinking of others and all the things that life throws at us, that sometimes we forget ourselves and that we need looking after as well.”

“It’s not just family and friends I miss either, it’s those people you see every day but they are not the people you could phone for a catch up, the people who you pass the time of day between meetings. Meetings via Microsoft teams just is not the same as seeing people face to face.”

Many mothers have found themselves needing to put on a ‘brave face’ at this challenging time, for the sake of their children. Staying upbeat despite stress and exhaustion has put a strain on many mothers’ mental wellbeing. Mothers may be supported in the practical sense but their own wellbeing and mental health is often overlooked or forgotten about.

“I did my best to keep positive, to reassure my children who were becoming increasingly anxious about the pandemic.”

“I’ve felt supported in a practical sense to keep her safe but, and I think this goes for a lot of aspects of motherhood, no one really asks if you’re ok?”

Further, mothers with children in shielding groups, especially very young children, are feeling anxiety and uncertainty at this time. As restrictions ease, will there be support and protective considerations in place for this group?

For others, lockdown has led to realisation of mental health impacts in ‘normal’ life, with one Depute Headteacher telling us, *“It took this enforced stop for me to recognise the chronic stress that has been part of my life for several years.”*

Women have adapted and found many different ways to help their state of mental health, including spending time outside with nature, reading, writing, knitting, faith, spirituality and practicing mindfulness. Social media has had a negative impact, as it puts expectations and pressure on women to achieve and be productive. However, other online activities such as exercise classes and groups

such as Weight Watchers etc have helped many women keep on top of their health and improve their mental wellbeing.

“Nature has given me a space to find peace from worrying about the future and the chaos that the world is in right now.”

“Give yourself permission to not compare yourself to others, and to do, think, feel what is right for you.”

“During the depths of this lockdown, I have felt exhaustion and failure, but I have also felt hope and joy. There were some extremely hard days and admittedly some really fun days.”

Loss & Grief

Families have lost loved ones at this time and have been unable to get closure and grieve together. They may need extra professional support by counsellors, spiritual care teams and mental health experts.

“Unable to be with loved ones at a time when family naturally want to be there to say good bye has been incredibly difficult and challenging.”

Childcare & Family

Some women have found positive impacts of lockdown in relation to childcare – another parent is there to help at mealtimes and with household tasks. There are no tight schedules to juggle when everything is cancelled, with this ‘slowing down’ being especially beneficial to parents with children of different ages.

However, many others feel that *“Women are taking on the lioness’s share of home schooling and unpaid care work.”* Many women have instantly stepped into the caring role for wider family.

“I’m grateful to have been able to shop for my household as well as my parents and elderly in-laws, and to have that check in with them, even if only through the window when I deliver their shopping. I’m full of gratitude for those caring for others who do not have family to shop for them, collect prescriptions, check in on them.”

Those still out working have had the challenge of being conflicted with what’s best – safety and health of their family is a concern. Wider families have missed out on key development stages of young children, as well as being able to support families with childcare duties.

Working From Home

Those with children at home who are also working from home (WFH), or with partners doing so, continue to find this a stressful experience. Some mothers WFH have felt guilt due to their need to work and manage home life. Women feel it’s their responsibility to balance everything.

“At the start of lockdown I felt overwhelmed with the task that lay ahead of us – responsibility for the learning of 32 pupils, the home schooling of my own children, as well as keeping my household happy, safe and healthy.”

Mothers who are single and those who’s partners already work remotely (e.g. oil rigs, military, etc.) have had to set aside their own goals, no matter how large, and work to care for children.

“I was in the middle of the 3rd year of an online degree, but I have had to put that to one side. I’ve been home educating one child and wondering how to entertain the other. It was hard enough being mum and dad without throwing this into the mix.”

Employment

There continue to be widespread concerns as more women are likely to have lost jobs at this time due to the sectors impacted.

Women who contracted the virus who spoke to the SWC had great support from their employers and colleagues while sick.

Young women have lost, and continue to lose, roles in sectors that are perceived as low skilled (e.g. fashion retail assistants). This not only impacts on income but also on mental health and future employment prospects. For many, these entry level roles are the promising beginning of a career in the industry.

Students completing courses and graduating this year have not been able to celebrate this achievement in the traditional way, and are now faced with huge concerns about employment. Many young women are having to reassess their living situations during the crisis, due to the financial repercussions of unemployment and uncertainty of future.

“I feel like I’m stuck in limbo: university behind me but employment seeming a long way off.”

“A few weeks into lockdown I had to leave my flat in Edinburgh due to financial issues as a result of the coronavirus. The stress of moving, coupled with the pressure of completing my thesis at home, made it extremely hard to get motivated.”

Education

Teachers have had to adapt quickly for remote learning. The flexibility of remote teaching has allowed some women to invest in themselves and focus on other professional development opportunities. However, the continued possibility of mixing remote/in school working continues to cause concern for women regarding childcare and the education of children at home. Adults in these positions will need collective support.

“For adults to support the youngsters, we will all need to be supporting each other too.”

Children transitioning into primary or secondary school are not receiving usual levels of support. This has particularly impacted young people with additional support needs and disabilities, as they would work with a team to ensure all necessary support is in place.

There are well established concerns regarding the wellbeing and mental health of those working in secondary education across Scotland. The impacts of the pandemic will call for further development and support in this area.

“When I hear people talk about getting back to normal, I don't want to. I don't want to be close to breaking point at the end of each term. I don't want to spend all my time dealing with other people's families instead of being with my own.”

Wider Gender Inequality & Intersectional Issues

“This pandemic has exposed and exacerbated all the inequalities that were in our society before it came.”

- Concerns remain for women in academia who have fallen behind their male peers in publishing articles during lockdown.

“Even in 2020 it appears there is still a long way to go for women to gain equality in the home and workplace to allow them to achieve their full potential.”

- The past two months have seen an incredible global push for racial equality. Young black women in Scotland face many challenges from across society, organisations and sectors needing to change.

“Being a young black woman, I am in a battle between the real ‘me’ and the ‘me’ that society deems more acceptable. I have to be not too confident, yet not too timid. I have to be not too provocative yet not too modest. I have to indulge in the glorification of ‘being strong’ whilst remaining aware that celebrating ‘being strong’ encourages the perpetuation of the unequal balance of perils faced by women like myself.”

- Some women with disabilities have spent time during lockdown reflecting on their experiences, and society's perception of them. One young woman spoke about her late diagnosis of autism, and how lockdown helped her recognise new talents and employment opportunities.

“Lockdown gave me a chance to find out just how capable I am! I joined Glasgow Mutual Aid (a group of volunteers supporting local community groups). As part of the dispatching team I quickly found myself developing protocol, writing policies and recruiting volunteers. I've applied for two jobs during lockdown, and already been interviewed for one. I have also applied to a casting call for a mini-series starring a neurodiverse actress. For a long time, I didn't believe I was worth an employer's time to make

the adjustments I need to thrive in the workplace. Now that I know this comes from a lack of self-belief rather than a lack of talent, I've developed Oddities, a social enterprise which gives other autistic people the space and support to recognise their capacities."

Positive Outcomes of Lockdown

Job losses, furlough and many other aspects of current circumstances have led to women of all ages pursuing new ventures and moving outside their comfort zone. Some women have realised their capacity to pursue more creative ventures and untraditional roles. Others have written blogs and presented at online events.

Voluntary opportunities that have arisen in local areas have increased women's community involvement and sense of social purpose, and in turn have developed confidence. This has taught many new skills to volunteers, which will be particularly beneficial in the long term for women who are currently unemployed.

"To any woman feeling she is in a rut during lockdown, I have bad days where I don't move, and others where I spend the whole day doing what I love. Do that thing you're scared of doing but want to so badly."

Awareness of sustainable consumption and shopping small/locally is increasing rapidly at this time, and being encouraged through large-scale discussions across social media platforms.

"The small business, sustainable fashion sector is somewhere I hadn't previously been involved in until now. I urge people to shop small, and tell people if you love their social media feed or their work, because in a time like this kindness goes so far."

Lockdown has been a time of transition for many women across the country – crisis decisions and restrictions have shown many their true priorities and, in turn, what can be let go.

"As I sit writing my story I clearly see what really matters to me and appreciate each and every moment, for life is a very special gift."

Thank You

Thank you to all of the women who have contributed to our 'Experiences of 2020' blog so far. Your openness and honesty will help ensure women's voices are heard. The information contained in this report will be forwarded to local and national decision makers for their consideration.

Blog – www.scottishwomensconvention.org/blogs/covid19-experiences-1/
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter - @SWCwomen