



CONFERENCE REPORT

30<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Digitally Via Zoom

- The Scottish Women's Convention -  
**WOMEN AND COVID-19**

# Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair

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The SWC want to highlight how women have coped and delivered for their families and communities during the past year. After the overwhelming response to the contributors at our annual International Women's Day event, we decided to invite these speakers back to share their experiences of COVID-19 with women across Scotland.



It is up to us as women to stand in solidarity and to support one another. The pandemic has only made us better at that. We are proud that this sisterhood always gets demonstrated at SWC events and illustrates how women in Scotland pull together through these challenging times.

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our event as well as those who contributed via email. We would also like to thank our speakers for providing their wealth of knowledge and experience. The SWC will use all of the voices gathered to feed back to policy makers regarding women's experiences during the pandemic.

# Pam Duncan-Glancy

Pam is a disability equality and human rights activist. She is an ambassador for the One in Five campaign which aims to get more disabled people into politics and is a keen trade unionist.



Pam was also a member of the Commission on Local Democracy and a member for the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. She is a Scottish Labour Party candidate for the Regional List in Glasgow for the Scottish Parliament Elections 2021.

- Before COVID-19, disabled women's experiences were already some of the most disadvantaged in our country, many of these issues will be made much worse by the current pandemic.
- When disabled people are in work, the pay gap means that effectively they work for free at least the last 57 days of the year. Disabled people are more likely to have mental ill health. They still do not get the social care that is needed.

*After decades of austerity, disabled women have found our rights are often ignored or that we are the ones whose rights are the first to go. Society is largely designed without us and has not served us well.*

- For years, disabled women have asked to be able to work from home and make use of technology and employers have always said no. Whilst it's important to get back to face to face interactions, we have shown that the innovation is out there and we should seize it.
- For far too long, inequality has been the default position. There have not been those voices in the room to make the real changes needed and if we continue to work in this way and expect different answers, we are doing something wrong.

*The innovation of disabled women during the pandemic and the resilience shown has been incredible. We have had to fight through all that I have described plus all that COVID -19 has brought.*

- It is almost impossible to muster the strength to see anything positive in such a year, but we have seen the resilience of women and the light that has been shone on some very dark corners of society. That light I fundamentally believe has illuminated a consciousness and expectation that we must do things differently.
- We have uncovered that social security is not fit for purpose, that work is far too precarious and that women are quick to be dismissed from jobs when the going gets tough.
- I know we long to go back to normal but for many of us, normal was difficult and rife with inequalities. We must go forward and do better. Now is the time for us as women and sisters to do that and create a world that is fit for us.

*We should crave innovation from the high street to the boardroom and from the boardroom all the way to parliament. We need disabled women's voices in the room if we are to face the challenges of today and tomorrow.*

# Clare McNally

A committed trade unionist and human rights activist for several years, Clare has been involved in many campaigns for women's rights. She has a particular focus around period poverty and period dignity, writing numerous blogs and articles on the subject.

Clare is also passionate about ending gender-based violence and has volunteered for Women's Aid and other organisations.



- When we have a commitment to social justice, it is not just something we can switch off because of the pandemic. Many fights we had on our hands prior to COVID-19 are even more pressing now.
- The massive waves of solidarity we've seen across the globe and events like this highlight that hope and unity are still there. The Period Dignity Campaign is one that represents those things and the power of sisterhood. We believe no woman should be caught short and that period products should be made freely available.

*Products should be the norm in workplace toilets the same way as toilet paper and soap for the simple fact women do not choose to have periods. This campaign speaks for women and girls across the globe.*

- In 2018, the Scottish Government announced the roll out of free period products in schools, colleges and universities. This was a massive victory that was achieved after endless campaigning across women's rights groups, proving that something magical happens when we work together at a grassroots level and stay united.
- A few other workplace reps and I decided to send a motion to the PCS Trade Union National Conference calling on the UK Government to provide free products across all workplace toilets in the civil service. This motion was carried unanimously and is now part of the Union's national policy. Whilst this has not been made a reality just yet, we believe it will happen due to the massive momentum this has gained.
- We need to remember now that periods do not stop as a result of working from home and poverty doesn't stop as a result of the pandemic. That's why it was such a huge victory when the Period Products (Scotland) Bill became legislation in January 2021. It's such a huge privilege to be part of the first country in the world that has achieved this.

*This movement for period dignity has been a catalyst to unite women not just across Scotland but across the entire globe. I think this is proof that something magical happens when women work together. We can empathise together and something beautiful occurs when we are able to display empathy. It's where solidarity comes from.*

- The period dignity movement has been a vehicle for social change and sends a very powerful message to the world that as women we are not second-class citizens and that we won't suffer in silence. If we can get all that from free period products, imagine what else we can do if we stay united.

*It's really important we hear messages of hope and keep the faith and remember when we stay united, the right things happen.*

# Cynthia Osayamwen

Cynthia is a recommendable care assistant with years of experience in taking care of vulnerable people and mental health patients. She is the founder and president of Osarugue's Comfort Foundation, a charity organization that caters to the needs of mothers and children.



Cynthia is also a member of Women in Action, a group where people support and empower each other during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve mental health.

*I am a carer, a student and a worker. This pandemic has been really tough for me and others I work with. It completely changed the way we worked as carers and we had to stand by and watch as people passed away.*

- I suffered from COVID-19 for over six weeks and this was an extremely challenging time for me. I was hospitalised due to my oxygen levels being so low that I could not breathe. My mind didn't understand what was happening to me and I didn't want to accept that I had the virus.
- The first time I was admitted to hospital with COVID-19 was for two days. I was then hospitalised again due to being unable to breathe properly.

*When my test result came back as positive, it was quite frightening and detrimental to my mental health, I was so scared and couldn't help but think what would happen next. I was home alone at that point, bed-ridden and unable to move.*

- Having COVID-19 was such a debilitating time for me. I wanted to go back to work but for six weeks whenever I was tested my result would come back positive. It came to a point I began losing my sight and could not move. It was so mentally draining, and I was terrified I wouldn't be able to see again. My own recovery took so long.

*I was very lucky to have so much support during this time, everyone kept calling to check up on me, make sure I was okay and encourage me to get better. All I could think to myself was 'I have to do this to go back to work and get back to everyone I care about. My family, friends and group want to see me get better.'*

- Finally being able to return to work was extremely scary at first. It was the encouragement of loved ones and finding my own natural positivity again that helped me see that I needed to go back to the job I love. Going back and being able to share my story with others who had experienced what this disease can do was relieving in a way. It allowed me to see that this is a time when all of us in society have to come together.

*This time has been one of the hardest challenges many people will face. So many people have lost family and friends. We need to be able to share our own unique experiences and get through this together, encouraging and supporting each other.*

# Mary Boyd

Mary is a third year Adult Student Nurse at the University of the West of Scotland, Paisley. In early 2020 when Mary was in her second year, the world was hit by the pandemic.

Mary and her fellow student nurses were put to work assisting wards throughout Greater Glasgow and Clyde in the fight against COVID-19.



- Like most people, when COVID was first mentioned in early 2019 I didn't think much of it. It wasn't until I was on community placement going in and out of people's homes that we heard cases of the virus had appeared in the UK.
- For me, this was when the fear began to sink in because so many people around the world were dying. I suffer from asthma and both of my parents have COPD, so the worry that COVID could reach my loved ones was extremely strong. I also wondered what would happen with my degree with me being due to graduate in 2021. No one had any information at that point.
- As I still worked for the NHS Bank, I could be put to work doing as many shifts as possible in hospital wards. Unbeknownst to myself, I ended up contracting COVID-19 in April 2020. It came to the point that I couldn't breathe and had to be given steroids whilst self-isolating. Due to living on my own, I had to rely on an old school friend who lived close to me to deliver all the essentials I needed.

*That was a very low point for me as I couldn't do anything for myself, it was very disheartening.*

- The second week I still wasn't feeling any better and was given a course of antibiotics. It basically took me around six weeks to gain some form of normal health. I have still not completely recovered with my asthma continuing to be bad and my medication having to increase. I did however know I had to go back to work with the NHS to help others suffering from this virus.

*When September came and the second COVID-19 wave hit we were told we were going back out on placement and my heart sank. The thought of having to go back and work on these wards not knowing what I would be put against was really frightening now I had experienced what this virus could do to my body.*

- This time I did feel much more protected. We were given all the correct PPE and were taught well how to put it on properly. Probably one of the hardest things was being unable to give patients a smile to make them feel better due to the masks we had to wear.
- It was not easy deciding whether to go out on the frontline and work in hospital, but nursing is my vocation and I had to use this as valuable learning experience. I was then finally able to take some time off to focus on coursework and have some spare time. I still have two more placements to do before I finish my course, but COVID-19 is not going anywhere.

*It's been a situation with extreme ups and downs. This has affected so many lives and so many people have lost loved ones. I truly hope that with the roll out of vaccinations and further investigation we can finally get back to some form of normality.*

# Erin Moffat

Erin has been a critical care staff nurse at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital for three years. She has continued to provide high quality care to acutely unwell patients throughout the pandemic and is proud to be part of the Medical High Dependency Unit.



Erin has also been undertaking additional shifts to administer vaccinations to elderly and vulnerable members of the public.

- The High Dependency Unit (HDU) where I work is one of critical care where we carry out closer monitoring and more invasive treatments than regular wards can provide patients.
- In the last year, myself and my colleagues have faced many difficult situations and unprecedented changes to our department and job role. This has included caring for patients battling COVID-19 as well as continuing care for patients with other conditions.

*The challenges have been both physical and mental. Our patients are isolated from their families for weeks or months at a time. Having to keep loved ones away whilst patients are going through the most devastating time of their life is traumatic for everyone involved.*

- To protect ourselves we must wear head to toe PPE for 12 hour shifts in an extremely fast paced and highly stressful environment. The increase in patients means we are stretched beyond capacity and we have had to double our usual bed numbers. We are also relying on staff who are unfamiliar in the critical care environment to help.
- I'm conscious of the fact that no matter how tough it is for us, what the patients and their family are going through is so much worse.

*We build a relationship with patients and offer reassurance and encouragement when they are at their most vulnerable. We root for them to get better like they are our own family.*

- Nurses support patients and help them tolerate necessary but uncomfortable therapies. In COVID HDU we do everything we can to save lives and prevent patients going to intensive care. Sadly, despite our best efforts, we cannot win every battle with every patient and we have seen so much tragedy over the last 12 months.

*No one can understand until you have witnessed first-hand the reality of this disease. We laugh, and we cry with these patients. We always remember that they are someone's parent, grandparent or child - they are not just part of the statistics that were being announced daily.*

- Despite the ongoing challenges, we have adapted quickly and work extremely hard in the fight against COVID-19. Hope is not lost amidst this grief as we have seen so many people get better and discharged home. We are tired after such a long year, but we will continue to deliver essential care for patients who come into our care.

*As this is an SWC event, I want to highlight that some of the strongest women I know are nurses. I hope people will finally appreciate their true value. They are strong, caring, and highly skilled individuals who deserve to be recognised as such.*

***Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair, asked the following question of the panel:***  
*What was the worst thing that you experienced during the pandemic and what gave you the most hope?*

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**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** I think there have been ups and downs for all women over the whole year. One day you may think you can do this, the next day it could be terrible. In terms of the worst issue that sticks out for me, I would have to say it was the Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Orders that were placed on many disabled people's lives. That highlighted an assumption that certain people were not necessarily worth saving.

To actually get to a point in society and have to ask questions about whether disabled people's lives are worthy is unjustifiable. I understand that there are very difficult choices for clinicians to have to make but given the significant inequality and lack of representation of disabled people and disabled women, I found that incredibly hard to watch. To see the statistics come out of that and learn of the disproportionate number of disabled people who died because of COVID-19, even controlling for underlying conditions, has been the hardest thing to take.

In terms of positivity, being able to cram in more meetings and see people more regularly over the computer has been extremely enjoyable. That doesn't mean I wouldn't swap this for being in the same room as people and obviously this has drawbacks and can be tiring, but it's been great to be able to see more people and hear their stories in such an accessible way.

**Clare McNally:** What immediately springs to my mind is coming out of that bubble of denial and accepting COVID was actually happening. For me this was truly heart breaking. I had immediately fast forwarded to what this would mean for services that were already suffering from so many cuts -we already had a massive fight on our hands. All I could think was how COVID was going to affect all the equality strands, how suicide was going to go up and how domestic abuse was going to increase. I think I needed to hit that part where it was very emotionally difficult and painful.

However, I started realising that I had to concentrate on what I could do, then I developed a sense of peace. I stayed connected and engaged with the trade union movement and the women's rights movement and tried to take it one day at a time. I think because of the past year, as difficult as it has been, I got a lot stronger. Events like this are almost like a little nudge that I can see I am doing the right thing and that if we stay connected, we can do the right thing together.

**Cynthia Osayamwen:** The members within my group Women in Action were so supportive and encouraging of me. That was extremely important, particularly when I was suffering so badly with COVID-19. Having someone there when you are down that you can call and who will lift your spirit up is the most important thing.

The past year has been so tough for every single one of us. I think we all need to keep reminding ourselves that if you know someone is struggling, call up and actually speak to them. If you feel you can't help that person, then even recommending someone they can talk to or signposting them to an organisation with expertise makes such a difference. We need to keep that focus on people's mental health and ensure they are not becoming isolated during this challenging time.

**Mary Boyd:** I think one of the big things for me is that this pandemic has made me realise that I want to get into respiratory care to continue my nursing work. We still have so much to learn about this illness and it's important to apply that learning to save lives and gain as much understanding of COVID as possible. It's so important to gather that information and for case studies to be put forward for people to read and gain more experience. When I worked in respiratory wards, I witnessed first-hand just how understaffed they are. Even though there have been periods where it has felt so bad, I've had inspiration from the experience to work in that area. It has really lit a fire in me.

**Erin Moffat:** Like everyone else at the very beginning of the pandemic, my colleagues and I did not think this would last anywhere near as long as it has. We thought we'd battle on and everything would be fine. What I think has really got us through is working as part of a group where teamwork is so important, that really raises our spirits. Another major thing is realising no matter how difficult it is for us, what that patient and family are going through is much worse, we just have to be there for that individual when they are at the most vulnerable point in their life.

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Please note our staff are working from home in current circumstances.

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