

The diverse and shared experiences of women during COVID-19 and hopes for the way forward

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The COVID-19 pandemic had begun quietly in New Zealand in late February 2020. On the afternoon of 23 March, the move to Alert Level 4, put the country into a nationwide lockdown. From that moment, 5 million New Zealanders, just over half of whom were female,¹ came to experience life as they had never known it.

While preparing for this piece I have listened to the stories of many women. For some, it was a time when work groups, neighbours and families came together to question and to plan. For others, the beginning of lockdown sounded a warning of the isolation and loneliness to come, and for some, this would be in a country that was still foreign.



Across the globe the pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerability, inequity and inequality and our country is no exception. In spite of remarkable government and community efforts to minimise the impact, our experiences are inevitably shaped by myriad issues: where and how we live, our income; job; age and health, by our whānau situation, and of course our gender.

Although we may talk in general terms about “women’s experience”, it isn’t, of course, that simple. The reality of our diversity and the resulting inequity and inequality is often overlooked. This includes our ethnicity and culture; our education, training, language, income, rare disorders and disability, and where we are across the whole gender LGBTQI+ continuum.

Too often, when we look at data we forget to think about women’s intersectionality. If a woman is Māori she has a higher risk of cervical cancer and poor health than a Pākehā woman. She is also more likely to be a single parent, unemployed, in a lower paid or part time job, and on an hourly rate. If a woman has a disability, the challenges are further compounded: she is more likely to experience violence, and to find it even more difficult than other women or disabled men to escape abuse or gain employment. If a woman is

¹ StatsNZ Infodata: provisional estimate of 5,002,100; 2,463,100 males with a median age of 36.2 and 2,539,100 females with a median of 38.5.

older or retired she is likely to have begun and finished her working life on a lower salary than her male colleagues, and retired with lower savings.

For these reasons alone women are more likely than men to experience COVID-19 related job losses and, for different reasons they are less likely to be employed on “shovel projects.”. But women are also more likely to work in the frontline during a pandemic, whether in a supermarket or as a nurse or carer. And they are far more likely during lockdown to manage the majority of household tasks and then balance this with their paid work, if they are employed.

New Zealand has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the OECD. This is a preventable pandemic, which all too often escalates in situations like COVID-19. Nor does it occur only in the damp, substandard homes of neglected people, but across society. However, Women’s Refuge seems to have experienced fewer calls than expected during the Lockdown weeks, and there are understandable reasons that may contribute to this. In the words of one woman, “It’s even harder to run away in a Lockdown.” Several systems were also put in place, with the help of a number of businesses, to enable women to make calls for help that were untraceable.

As we move further into the unimagined territory of economic and financial challenges we are likely to see a greater risk of family violence as job losses, and unemployment grow. This downward spiral can bring an erosion of self-worth, often accompanied by frustration, hopelessness and anger leading to poor mental health, dependence on drugs and alcohol, and outbursts of violence, all of which are shared by confused children and partners.

Now, nearly 4 months on, we in Aotearoa New Zealand are enjoying a freedom and a degree of safety well beyond most countries. I think many women, whatever their political beliefs, share respect for our PM, who, with several other women Prime Ministers has been recognised as demonstrating real leadership, and a genuine commitment to putting people first in a time of chaos.

As I write this we are uncertain about the second wave that may yet come, or a new mutation. But we do know that climate change, urbanisation, population growth and damaged ecosystems can be the global passport for pandemics, and that climate change has the power to prevent us reaching all or any of our goals.

We have learned the importance of buying local, we know that the air was clearer and cleaner during lockdown. We know we can no longer ignore the increasing impacts of climate change which will kill far more than COVID. Government, business and every New Zealander must now take steps to ensure that we are in greater harmony with our planet, for the future of our children and our grandchildren.

The collective response of many Māori iwi, hapū and whānau has shown yet again how much all New Zealanders can learn from the concepts of te ao Māori, through kaitiakitanga-by practising guardianship of the natural world, and kotahitanga, building togetherness and unity, as we move forward to ensure the future wellbeing of our people and our planet.

We cannot go on as before. The Lancet recently reminded us that “globally two-thirds of the health and social care workforce are women,” often in occupations that are often undervalued and poorly paid, despite being essential in the pandemic. In addition, “Being at the front line of the pandemic response places these women at risk”, and this, of course, also has implications for their children and whānau. We also know that “the economic arrangements, policy frameworks, and market forces that determine the distribution of paid and unpaid labour across society are powerful determinants of health.”²

We know too from wide ranging research across the world that women bear the brunt of natural disasters in many ways-mainly because of their responsibility for families, food, shelter and safety. COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the intractable, intersecting problems that were with us here, long before COVID. These include homelessness, the situation of 18,000 people on the waiting list for housing, the number of children in care, the challenges confronting disabled people, those with rare disorders and their carers. These urgent issues must be addressed.

Resistance to the frequent requests for gender responsive budgeting continues, and this must change. As we develop further responses to the recent challenges and prepare better for those to come, a multi -focal gender, ethnic, inequality and sustainability lens will be essential. Only then can there be genuinely inclusive partnership, consultation, planning and a collaborative response. Only then can we ensure that “no-one is left behind”.³

Ironically, this fierce pandemic has given us the chance to review, reframe and renew, rather than return to the “same, same old.” We cannot afford to waste that chance.

² Published online 19 June 19 2020, <https://www.thelancet.com/>

³ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>