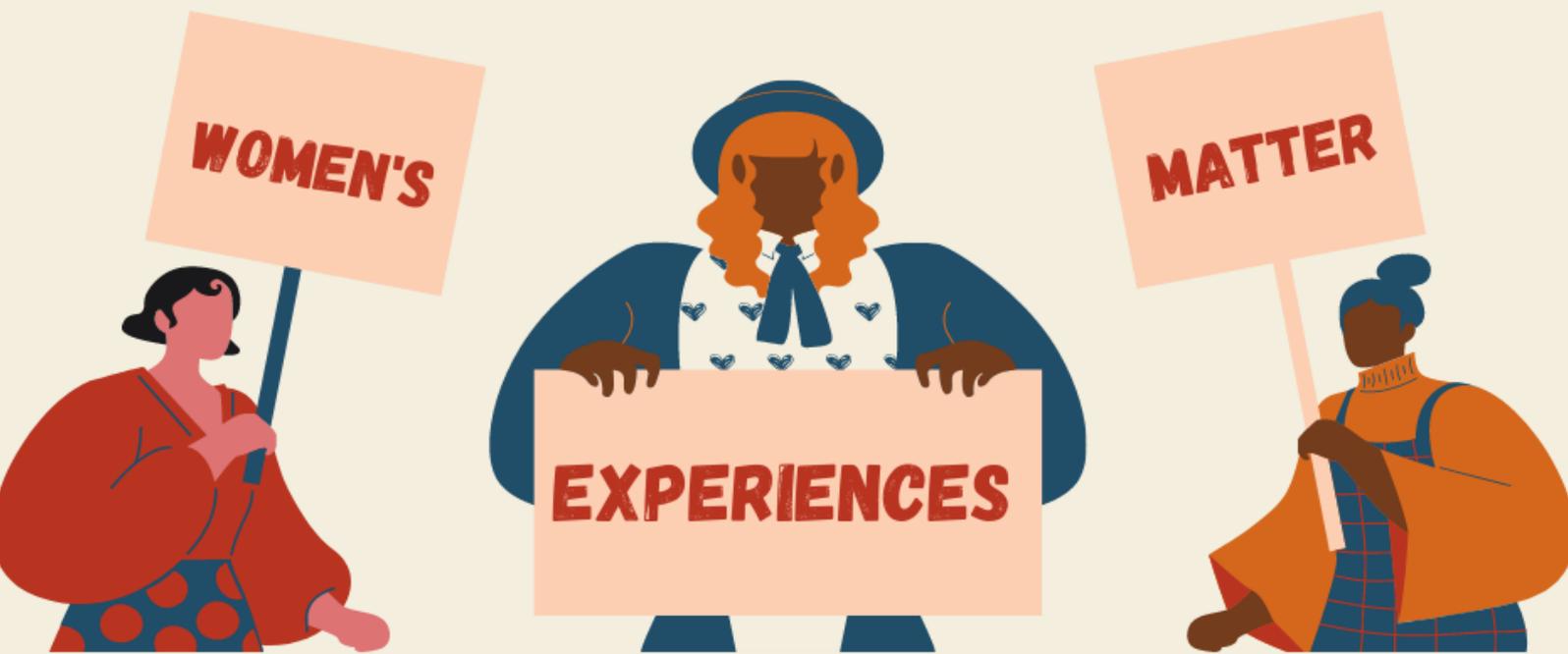


# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON WOMEN'S LIVES



## DONEGAL WOMEN'S NETWORK REPORT 2021

national collective of  
community based  
women's  
networks



An Roinn Leanáí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth

# **CONTENTS**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ABOUT THE SURVEY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CHANGES TO WOMEN'S LIVES</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SUPPORTS FOR WOMEN</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>34</b>

## Introduction

NCCWN Donegal Women's Network is a grassroots women's organisation; we are 1 of 17 other National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks (NCCWN) projects in Ireland. The NCCWN mission is to support the empowerment of and be an active advocate for women who experience disadvantage and marginalisation, we promote social justice, women's human rights and equality as well as supporting positive and sustainable changes to women's lives within society. Our vision is a just and equal society for all women.

The NCCWN works from two core approaches, a feminist approach and a community development approach both of which are intrinsically linked. These approaches underpin our work and the NCCWN organisational structure. We are funded through the Department of Children, Disability, Equality & Integration (DCDEI) to advance equality for women experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation.

## *Background*

In June 2020 Donegal Women's Network conducted a Covid-19 impact survey with 832 women living across Donegal taking part. These survey results provided a snapshot into the lived experiences of women during the March-June 2020 restriction period. The data gathered identified a series of issues impacting women across the county. The data further highlighted that the Covid-19 pandemic had created additional stresses for women in the County and added pressure to existing gender inequalities and gender stereotypes.

The women who took part in the survey talked about a number of issues and challenges they have faced between the March-June 2020, pandemic period. Which included dealing with additional household workload, increased caring responsibilities; dealing with post-traumatic stress with Covid-19 restrictions re-triggering past traumatic experiences, going through pregnancy during the pandemic, dealing with ongoing health issues while trying to stay safe through the pandemic.

Some of the most common themes raised by women with children which directly impacted their mental health related to childcare and work. Many of these women talked about the additional workload and the challenge of balancing working from home and childcare, expectations.

While women living with a partner highlighted that even with a partner or husband in the house, it still fell on them to be responsible for childcare. Home-schooling was a particular issue raised by women, many stated that they had experienced an assumption by their partner that it would be them who would look after home-schooling. Which was a cause of frustration for women. Many women particularly young women, women living in their own and lone parent mothers highlighted experiencing feelings of anxiety, isolation and loneliness. With constant worrying and isolation leading to sleep issues. Being away from friends and family

also contributed to this. For others stress and anxiety was being brought on by worrying about the uncertainty of the future, finances and how they were going to pay bills if no work continued because of Covid-19.

As a grassroots organisation the survey information gathered IN 2020 helped in the Donegal Women's Network 2021 planning of our working areas and the development of courses and workshops for women. While as an organisation that promotes and supports women's equality we shared our research report to all the Donegal political representatives, to highlight and ensure they recognise the issues women in the county are facing. In January 2021, Thomas Pringle TD highlighted our research findings to the Minister for Social Protection on Covid-19 during a Dáil Éireann sitting.

## **2021 Follow up Survey and Methodology**

A full year into the pandemic the Donegal Women's Network believed it was again important to monitor and further identify how the pandemic was influencing and impacting women's lives in Donegal. In June 2021, we developed a follow up survey and asked women to share with us their experiences of life through the pandemic over the last year.

The survey was made up of twenty-eight questions of which nineteen were required response questions to allow the survey to be completed and submitted. Questions were a combination of quantitative (multiple choice response questions) and qualitative (open text response questions) to enable us to best capture the data to highlight how the pandemic has impacted women's lives in Donegal. The survey fell into five sections;

**About you:** These questions related to the respondents age, where in the county they lived, their civil status, household makeup, ethnic or cultural background,

**Changes to your life:** These questions related to direct changes in respondents' lives due to the pandemic, such as any support sort, challenges experienced, increased day to day responsibilities and volunteering through the current period.

**Impact on you personally:** These questions related to concerns respondents had due to the pandemic, impacts to their mental health and family life, personal learning.

**Impact on your paid work and employment:** These questions relate to changes in the respondent's employment and employers support in relation to childcare responsibilities.

**Supports for Women:** These questions related to the support respondents believed were required for women in Donegal post Covid-19 restrictions and gender equality in Ireland.

The survey was open to any woman living in Donegal over the age of 18+ years and was anonymous unless they had left contact details and agreed for a Donegal Women’s Network staff member to contact them to conduct a follow up in relation to the survey.

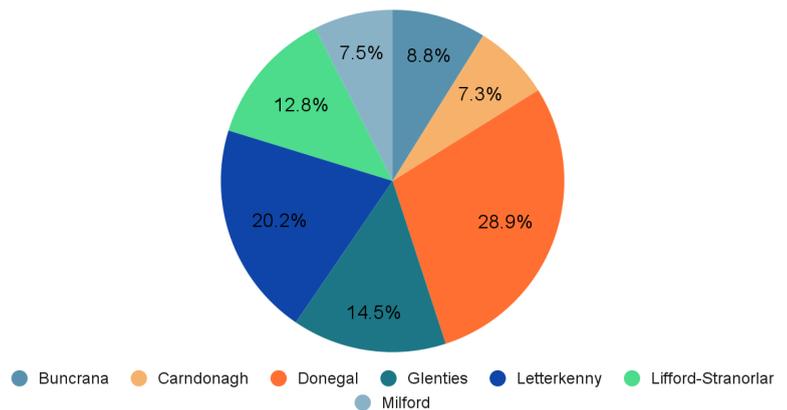
The survey itself was made available online via a google form between June-July 2021, with paper copies also made available for posting and an option to conduct the survey over the phone with a Donegal Women’s Network staff member. The survey was distributed via email to the women we have directly worked with, to other local community organisations to share among their networks, and a press release was sent to local papers and a social media campaign was developed to raise awareness of the survey.

After the closing date the data received was imported into Excel and cleaned to ensure there were no duplicates or errors. The multiple-choice response questions were calculated to give numerical figures and percentage breakdowns and the open text response questions were individually read, analysed and themed into categories to identify the emerging impacts being experienced by women in Donegal.

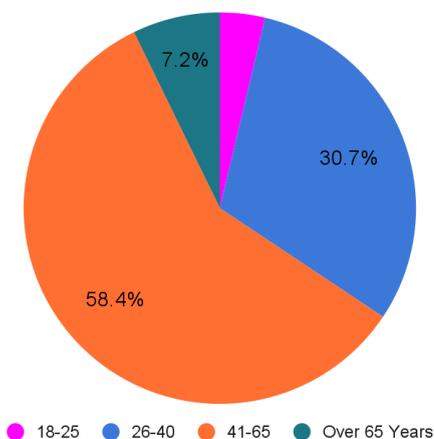
### Participants

509 women living across the seven local electoral areas in Donegal took part in the 2021 survey of which 26% had also taken part in the 2020 survey. The chart graphs below outline the different age ranges, civil status, household descriptions and the areas the women lived in who completed and submitted the survey.

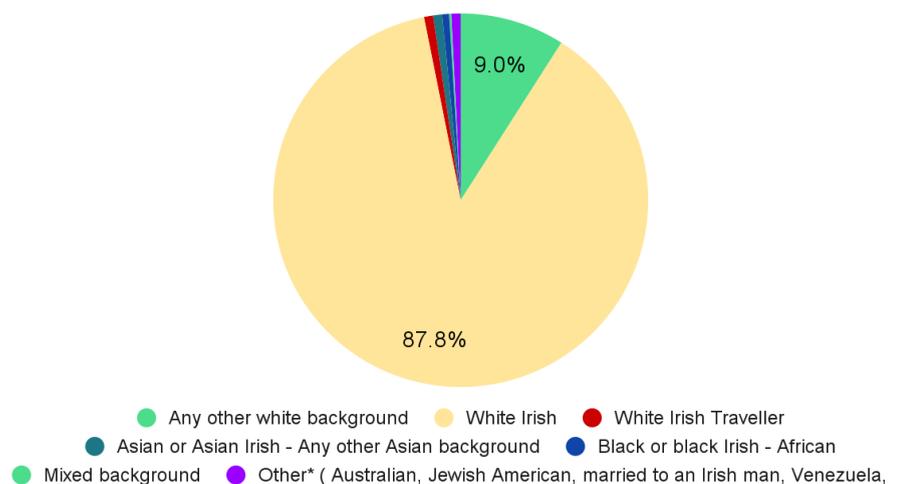
Living Areas



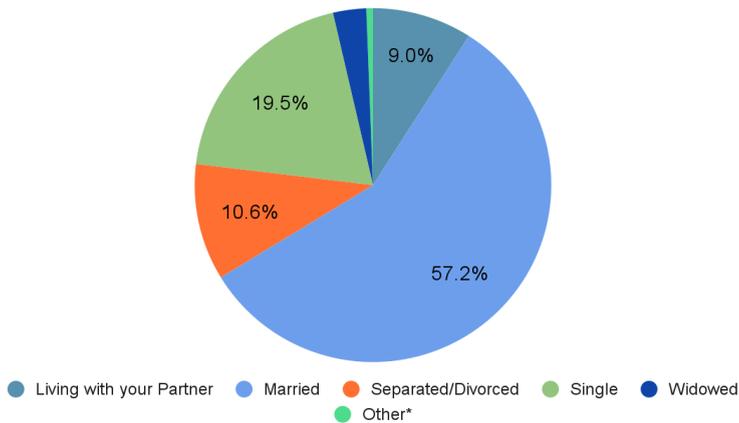
Age Range



Ethnic/Cultural Background



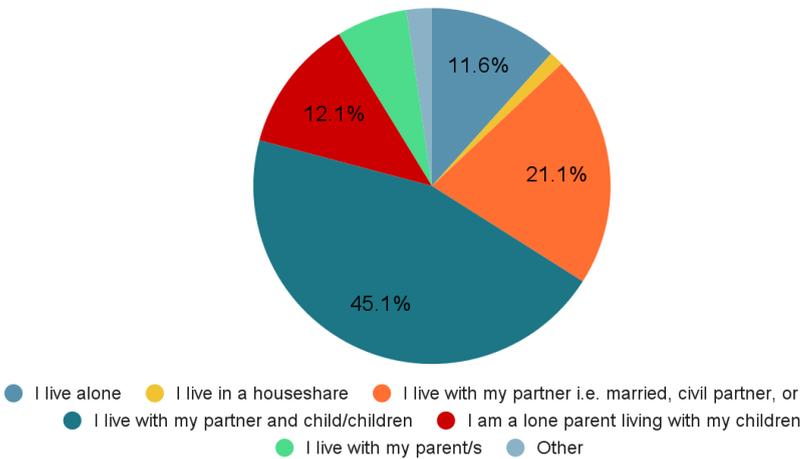
Marital/Civil Status



\*Other Civil status given by women included the following, Boyfriend, Carer and Dating.

\*I live with my partner under household status included (married, civil partner, or cohabiting)

Household



\*Other household descriptions given by women included the following; I am living with my husband and 2 children in my parents' house while our house is being built. My brother lives here too; I live as a carer in my mother's home; I live with my husband and adult grandson; I live with my husband, children and my parents live with us; I live with my mother; I live with my mother and adult son and care for her; Live between both mine and my partners home due to our working lives; Live with adult family members; Live with my dad; Parents and child; Separated and still living together; Siblings; Since lockdown in March 2020 my special needs brother lives with me until further notice; Single parent with adult child away at training.

### Covid-19 supports received

21.8% of the women surveyed stated that they had received or reached out for at least one form of Covid-19 support being offered during the June 2020-July 2021 period. 44% of the support received by the women was in the form of a Financial support such as Covid-19 payment. 16% of the support received related to a form of food support such as chef aid/ school parcels/ food bank or food voucher. While 31% of support were related to mental health support. 7% were related to a form of Home help support i.e. shopping delivery, shielding. While some 16% of the women who received support received multiple support types over this time period.

Women in the 18-25 (37%) and 26-40 years (25%) age range had the highest percentage when it came to receiving a covid-19 support. Within the Civil status category, separated/divorced (31.4%) and Widowed (31.3%) women had the highest percentage. Within Household status, women in Houseshare (42.9%) and lone parent mothers (30.6%) had the highest percentage. While with living areas within the county according to

local electoral area women in Carndonagh (27%) and Letterkenny (26.2%) reported the highest percentage rates in received support.

## Changes to Women's Lives

This section of the survey asked women a series of questions in relation to direct experienced changes in respondents' lives due to the pandemic. Changes such as any support sort, challenges experienced, increased day to day responsibilities i.e. increases in adult, child and housework responsibilities.

38% of women surveyed said that they had seen an increase in adult care responsibilities, an increase of 9% compared to the 2020 survey findings. 46.3% stated that they had experienced an increase in child care responsibilities, a slight increase of 2% compared to the 2020 survey findings. With 42.8% of women experiencing the home schooling of children.

61.4% stated that they had seen an increase in physical household workload (such as cooking, cleaning etc.) down 8% compared to the 2020 findings. 41.8% had seen an increase in household admin workload (such as managing bills, appointments etc.) which is up by nearly 9% compared to the 2020 findings. And 50.3% experienced an increase in supporting a family/community member who had to Cocoon due to the pandemic, this is a slight increase of 2% compared with the 2020 findings.

As shown in the 2020 survey findings, the level of experiences in increased responsibilities varied among women depending on women's age, civil and household status. Women in the 26-40 years' category reported the highest level of increased child care responsibilities for any age group; while married women reported the highest level in the civil status category which are both consistent with the 2020 findings. Within the household category, women living with their partner and child/children and lone parent mothers reported the highest experienced increase in child care responsibilities.

Women in the 18-25 years, followed by 26-40 years' category reported the highest level in Increased physical household workload; while women under Other, living with partner reported the highest level in the civil status category; within the household category, women living with partner and child/children and women living with a parent/s reported the highest experienced increase in physical household workload.

Women in the 18-25 years' category (63%) reported the highest level in supporting a family/community member cocooning for any age group, again this is consistent with the 2020 findings although there was a reported 9% experienced increase within this age group.

Widowed women (75%) reported the highest level in the civil status category; within the household category, women with other house status (75%) and women living with my parent/s (66.7%) reported the highest level in supporting a family/community member cocooning.

The outlined tables below reflect the levels of increased responsibilities experienced by women depending on age, civil and household status;

***Increases in child care responsibilities***

Age Group	YES	NO
18-25	21%	79%
26-40	70*%	30%
41-65	40%	60%
Over 65	8%	91%

Civil Status	YES	NO
Other	33.3%	66.7%
Living with a partner	47%	53%
Married	56.2*%	43.8%
Separated/Divorced	35.2%	64.8%
Single	28.3%	71.7%
Widowed	19%	81%

Household	YES	NO
Lives alone	5%	95%
House Share	14%	86%
Lives with partner i.e. married, civil partner, or cohabiting	13%	87%
Lives with partner and child/children	75.1*%	24.9%
Lone parent living with child/ren	59.7	40.3%
Lives with my parent/s	18.2%	81.8%
Other	25%	75%

***Increase in physical household workload (cooking, cleaning etc.)***

Age Group	YES	NO
18-25	79*%	21%
26-40	71*%	29%
41-65	60%	40%
Over 65	21.6%	78.4%

Civil Status	YES	NO
Other	100%	0%
Living with a partner	68*%	32%
Married	65.9*%	34.1%
Separated/Divorced	55.6%	44.4%
Single	49.5%	50.5%
Widowed	50%	50%

Household	YES	NO
Lives alone	25.4%	74.6%
House Share	42.9%	57.1%
Lives with partner i.e. married, civil partner, or cohabiting	40%	60%
Lives with partner and child/children	78*%	22%
Lone parent living with child/ren	69.4%	30.6%
Lives with my parent/s	72.7*%	27.3%
Other	58.3%	41.7%

***Supporting a family/community member who had to (Cocoon)***

Age Group	YES	NO
18-25	63*%	37%
26-40	49.4%	50.6%
41-65	53.5*%	46.5%
Over 65	21.6%	78.4%

Civil Status	YES	NO
Other	67*%	33%
Living with a partner	49%	51%
Married	51.7%	48.3%
Separated/Divorced	38.9%	61.1%
Single	48.5%	51.5%
Widowed	75*%	25%

Household	YES	NO
Lives alone	39%	61%
House Share	42.9%	57.1%
Lives with partner i.e. married, civil partner, or cohabiting	44.9%	55.1%
Lives with partner and child/children	52.8%	47.2%
Lone parent living with child/ren	48.4%	51.6%
Lives with my parent/s	66.7*%	33.3%
Other	75*%	25%

### Biggest Changes and Challenges Experienced

When asked the question What has been the biggest change/challenge you have experienced because of Covid-19? 92.7% of surveyed women directly answered this question, the main changes and challenges expressed by women related to their mental health with a focus on dealing with anxiety and loneliness, work loss, going pregnancy during a pandemic especially for first time mothers, balancing childcare and work commitments, home schooling, caring responsibilities, being a single parent during a pandemic, experiencing domestic violence, isolation, bereavement, lack of social connection, not seeing family or friends, travel restrictions, working from home and uncertainty and fear.

### Quotes from some women on their biggest change and challenges experienced

*“A pregnancy in a pandemic was very tough, mentally and physically for me. No pregnancy yoga (to keep me sane) and no toddler groups as I had a 1 year old throughout the pregnancy (also to keep me sane!) and giving birth in covid times was stressful. Our house plans were on hold because of covid and we were living with my*

*parents. It was great in some ways but also difficult too. We lost my nana too during covid and had to deal with a family funeral. It has been a very stressful time"*

*"Becoming a mother for the first time with absolutely no support whatsoever. The loneliness of being a first-time mother in these circumstances is overwhelming. For the first 4 months of my son's life we only left the house for medical appointments. It has been one of the most difficult and isolating experiences of my life."*

*"Being at home with all 3 children doing school work, trying to entertain them so my husband can work. Keep the house clean. Losing my father and not being able to spend time with him before he passed away."*

*"Becoming a carer for my elderly father, leaving my career and hitting complete burnout."*

*"Been very restricted in getting some time out of the home for myself as I'm a carer to my son and also my home life has been and is very stressful lately due to domestic violence."*

*"Being solitary, I had my food delivered so once a week for a few minutes I saw the delivery driver. I missed actual live conversations. Days seemed long, and lonely. "*

*"Being trapped inside with someone 24/7 with no escape, with fears of being stopped by the guards when out for a walk or drive. Living in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Having to move home away from all my friends and support and feeling completely isolated."*

*"Caring from an older parent. Carrying the worry that catching the virus could be deadly for my elderly Mum. Workload at times, working at home + household running and lack of separation between anything. The difficulty in getting hold of a medical doctor or medical appointment during the Pandemic year and worrying about my Mum's health throughout."*

*"I work in the HSE so I have been working through the full pandemic. I found childcare a real struggle when the children were off school. And managing any periods on my own when we had to self isolate that I couldn't reach out and get help. I have felt so alone through the full thing in relation to meeting friends and sharing my worries. I also attended counselling for previous domestic violence and found that all the struggle was only done through phone calls."*

*"I found the days and nights very long with no in person interaction with family and friends and the isolation was tough. Trying to stay positive when sometimes all I wanted to do was stay in bed and cry as I had no control due to restrictions."*

*“The Juggling of work, being an essential employee as well as my husband being an essential employee and having three children trying to homeschool am trying to get somebody to look after them and trying to do everything else.”*

*“Working throughout the pandemic has been stressful as there was a lot of worry about bringing the virus into our home and our family life. I worked throughout the year as a nurse at this worry of carrying the virus into my place of work was also a stress. The fear of those around you becoming sick both family and those I cared for.”*

### **Covid-19 Concerns**

When asked questions in relation to concerns in relation to the Covid-19 disease and vaccination. 71.5% of women said they were concerned about getting the disease; 78.4% said they were concerned about spreading the disease; 36.3% said they were concerned about living with someone who had an underlying problem.

38.1% of women surveyed said that they were concerned about getting the vaccine; 26% said they were concerned about accessing the vaccine, and 57.6% said they were concerned about the side effects of the vaccine.

### **The Impact of the Pandemic on Women’s Health**

The pandemic continues to have a far-reaching impact on women’s mental health across Donegal. When asked how would you describe how your mental health has been impacted by the pandemic? 55.8% of women said moderately and a further 24% said it had extremely been impacted. This is an increase from June 2020 when 61.1% felt their mental health had been impacted by the pandemic.

These percentage figures saw an increase for women depending on their age, women in the 18-25 age group reported the highest impact with 47.3% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 42.1% stating extremely impacted. Women in the 26-40 age group came second with 55.1% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 30.8% stating extremely impacted.

Women in the Carndonagh Local Electoral Area reported the highest level of mental health impact with 59.4% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 29.7% stating extremely impacted. Buncrana followed behind with 55.6% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 28.9% stating extremely impacted.

Women with a civil status of living with a partner had the highest percentage for any civil status category. With 59.6% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 29.8% stating extremely impacted. Separated/divorced women came second with 53.7% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 31.4% stating extremely impacted.

Women with a household status of living with a parent/s had the highest percentage for any household status category, with 48.4% stating that their mental health had been moderately impacted and a further 39.3% stating extremely impacted.

The amount of time women had to look after their mental health has also been impacted, when asked since the pandemic how much time have you had to look after your own mental health and wellbeing? 26.4% of surveyed women said the same amount of time, 31.6% said more time and 42% said less time.

51.2% of women within the 26-40 years age group, stated that they had less time to look after their mental health and wellbeing, the highest rate of all the age groups.

55.3% of women with a civil status of living with a partner reported the highest rate within the civil status group. And 53.2% of women with a household status of living with a partner and child stated that they had less time to look after their mental health and wellbeing, the highest rate of all the household status groups.

When asked the question, how have you managed your mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic? 472 women directly responded to this question with the majority of responses relating to remaining active, through engaging in outdoor activities particularly walking and other forms of outdoor exercise. Talking about how they felt, setting personal boundaries, reaching out for professional help and support. Using digital online technology to talk and stay connected with family and friends. Engaging in meditation and mindfulness techniques and signing up for online courses that supported mental health and wellness. For some women however, they found it a challenge to manage their mental health and wellbeing. Some found it particularly difficult to find the time because of either caring or increased work responsibilities.

### **Quotes from some women on how they managed their mental health and wellbeing**

*“A lot of days you feel fine but sometimes it has felt overwhelming. Just trying to keep things in context helps - as in, we are so much better off than many other countries, it may have felt like we had ages to wait for the vaccine but we will be among the first countries in the world to have a population fully vaccinated. Also chatting with friends and my partner about the ups and downs helps.”*

*“After the first lockdown I realised that I had to take time for me and since the reopening I’ve made guilt free appointments for massages, facials, reflexology etc Me time”*

*“Continued counselling sessions via zoom. reduced social media and exposure to news articles daily.”*

*“By immersing myself in nature, seeking meditations online and getting involved in online courses.”*

*“Daily exercise is a must, and if I do that, I get through the day much easier. January and February were tough as it was harder to get out.”*

*“I don’t have time to look after my mental health, having 7 children every day, a husband that has to work. I could go on about all the running and the lack of support for stay at home mothers.”*

*“I have existing mental health issues so am good at managing and recognising changes. I think overall my mental health improved. I walked, kayaker, swam and snorkelled. I learned to be grateful for where I live and that we could survive on not very much. With gratitude came positivity. However, my partner has never had mental health issues and was not as able to recognise a decline. He developed anxiety and negativity. He is in counselling now (after an intervention) and is far healthier.”*

*“I have had more time to look after my mental wellbeing thanks to remote working, but have found it very difficult to access support. Phone consultation is no replacement for face to face therapy, but I’m afraid of the risk of attending in-person appointments until the vaccination programme is rolled out further.”*

*“I started daily phone/video calls with either family or friends. Yoga and meditation. Writing in my journal. Daily exercise or walk/run. Joined online groups such as book club, travel groups. No social media (FB/Insta) on weekends. Online courses to up skill for the future.”*

*“I tried to meet one friend for a walk throughout the pandemic, this got me out of the house for an hr most weeks, I got fresh air and a good chat which definitely helped. Being able to get out to work every day helped too as I still had social contact through work when a lot of others were seeing no one.”*

*“I worked flat out throughout the pandemic. There has been no time to even think about it. I came off my HRT for a few months and that didn't go well so I returned to it.”*

*“It has been a struggle trying to juggle everything. Apart from being outdoors for walks, swims etc it's been almost impossible to get time to myself due to family duties.”*

*“Not managed it at all really, just feel like you’re treading water all the time, but obviously not it’s a bit easier that things are getting back to “normal “*

*“It’s really been on the bottom of my list of things to look after, I've not had any time to myself away from the home and kids so my number one priority through all this was looking after them.”*

*“Taking part in online interactions and Donegal Women's Network courses. They were a lifeline to me.”*

*“Staying in touch with friends around the world knowing I am not alone. Mental health has improved due to home working and less pressure taking children to events.”*

*“with difficulty but reached out to colleagues in similar settings.”*

*“With great difficulty, it has taken a long time to reconcile with the fact that we don't have any outlets available to us like we used to, I don't have any breaks during the day or evening until my children go to bed. I have had to rethink priorities when it comes to screen time just so I can have 20 minutes to drink a coffee etc.”*

*“Working on the front line as a nurse, I haven't had any time to look after my wellbeing, especially with leave being cancelled and looking after covid patients and the fear of bringing it home to my family and parents.”*

Isolation and loneliness continue to be particular areas of mental health that were experienced by women with 75.4% of women reporting that they have experienced feelings of isolation, a sharp increase from the 60.4% reported in 2020. While 70.7% of women reported feelings of loneliness since the pandemic, again an increase from the 57% reported in 2020.

*Category groups with some of the highest reported experiences of feelings of Isolation were;*

<b>Category Group</b>	<b>Percentage Level</b>
Women between 18-25 years	94.7%
Living with a partner (Civil status)	89.3%
Women between 26-40 years	86.5%
Lone parent living with child/ren (Household status)	85.4%
Separated/Divorced (Civil status)	85.1%
Lives with my parent/s (Household status)	81.8%
Women living in the Letterkenny Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	78.6%
Women living in the Milford Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	76.3%
Women living in the Donegal Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	76.1%

*Category Groups with some of the highest reported experiences of feelings of Loneliness were;*

<b>Category Group</b>	<b>Percentage Level</b>
Women between 18-25 years	94.7%
Lives with my parent/s (Household status)	81.8%

Separated/Divorced (Civil status)	81.4%
Women between 26-40 years	80.7%
Lives alone (Household status)	79.7%
Single (Civil status)	77%
Women living in the Letterkenny Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	74.8%

## Medical and Health Care Appointments

54.4% of women reported having had a medical or health care appointment impacted due to the pandemic over the past year. These included appointments in the following areas;

- Reproductive health/ smear tests/ coil removal
- Delay to STI screening
- Mammogram/ breast check
- Access to GP appointments
- blood tests
- Dentist treatment
- Counselling
- Fertility treatments cancelled
- Cancer treatment impacted
- Delayed Hospital appointment/ operations
- Maternal health/ follow up appointments post birth cancelled, lack of face to face follow ups

A number of women highlighted that the lack of face to face appointments was a real challenge for them. Many appointments were conducted via telephone. Women also spoke about the difficulty in accessing an appointment with their GP because you had to talk with reception first and they found it was them that determined the priority of the issue to then pass on to the doctor, for many this was an unconvertable situation as they did not like explaining their medical issue to a non-trained medical professional.

Some women also talked about putting off calling their GP because they didn't want to be potentially asked to have a covid-19 test before being seen, others put off appointments because they thought they may not be seen as an emergency because doctors were dealing with Covid issues as the priority.

### Comments made by women in relation to health appointments during the period

*“A longer waiting list due to the pandemic, it was very hard to get through to doctors on the phone. Feeling that you shouldn't waste doctor's time during pandemic for check-up etc.”*

*“Attended all antenatal and scan appointments and birthed completely alone. Neonatal intensive care unit attendance is severely limited and subsequent Public Health Nurse appointments for the baby extremely sparse.”*

*“Awaiting a breast clinic appointment, should have been seen in under 6 weeks now waiting 4 months no appointments in sight now due to the cyber Attack, also a lack of medical support and follow up, physio etc for my mother who was bed-bound after a prolonged hospital stay, she recently died after an 8 month illness, covid had a huge impact on her mental well-being and destroyed the last months of her life.”*

*“Cancelled Health Screen. The process around medical appointments were stressful in terms of getting appointments., feeling that attending appointments was putting my Mum at greater risk of catching the virus. My Mum avoided a recommended hospital visit as she was afraid to catch the virus. Taking the decision to stay at home felt safer for my Mum on one hand but added stress for us both as we did not know if / how much risk taking this meant around her health.”*

*“Couldn't get a smear test for 6 months awful when u have previously had an abnormal one”*

*“Gynaecology- suffer with endometriosis, have not been seen in 2 years. GP appointments over the phone. Reoccurring Sinus infection - sent for multiple covid tests as a result, delay in getting antibiotics, phone consultations ineffective. Waited 4 months overdue for thyroid bloods- no prescription for 2 months waiting on bloods and then results. The pharmacy offered a 2-month supply but couldn't not offer any more until bloods were checked.”*

*“Having to do physiotherapy and other appointments via telemedicine (though I was also happy not to have to travel to a distant hospital for one of those appointments). Avoiding going to the GP because of concerns about how the system works now.”*

*“Have not made appointments as I do not like the phone call consultation as you can barely hear the doctor. It's very off putting.”*

*“having to tell the doctor's receptionist what was wrong with me for them to determine whether I could see the doctor or just get a call back. should not have to tell personnel info to receptionists. Because of this I avoided calling the doctor as much as I could.”*

*“I feel like I can't ring the doctor over queries around health checks etc due to them automatically sending you for a covid test, ongoing aches and pains (at one stage a lump in my breast) I felt like they were trying to relate it back to covid so they didn't have to see you.”*

*"I had my first baby and was only allowed my partner with me for the final hour of labour. I also had to attend many appointments alone which included being diagnosed with gestational diabetes and being completely overwhelmed with information. Nurses didn't have the time to explain things thoroughly to me. A support person would have been helpful."*

*"I have put off making doctors' appointments concerning non-covid related issues, for example, breast screening."*

*"It is impossible to get through on the phone to my doctor which leaves me feeling vulnerable. I had routine bloods cancelled when I was taking ro-accutane for acne. Basically, I am fortunate that I had no extreme medical needs because I wouldn't feel confident that they would be met. Any minor problems I had have not been addressed. I wasn't able to get the flu jab this year even though I work in a school."*

*"Some of my own medical appointments were cancelled. I was started on a long-term course of treatment for an autoimmune disease without some of the required tests being carried out prior to starting treatment. Treatment plan was decided by a consultant over the phone and I am still waiting to be reviewed as my medication isn't working but I cannot get an appointment."*

*I found it helpful to be able to have phone appointments with the GP for my children. That meant I could get prescriptions without having to take them to the doctors and get a babysitter for the rest."*

*"Telephone only appointments. In terms of appointments for my children only one adult is allowed which can be hard if both parents would like to attend."*

*"We moved just before lockdown and I was unable to register with the local doctor's surgery, I was even turned away while pregnant. Took almost one year to see a doctor for a non-emergency appointment. Also went through two miscarriages alone due to partners being barred from hospital."*

## **Family Life and Social Connection**

Women's lives have been required to change and adapt since the pandemic began, particularly in relation to their family life. Family's within households have been required to spend far more time together, for some women this has brought about additional strains within the family unit, with 31.8% of women surveyed reporting experiencing an increase in family arguments, and 23.6% reporting an increase in partner relationship arguments since the pandemic.

While the pandemic has impacted women's social connections with family and friends too. 81.5% of surveyed women stated that they felt disconnected from friends, an increase from the 74% reported in the 2020 survey results, while 68.8% stated that they felt disconnected from their family, also an increase from the 60% reported in 2020.

**Category groups with the highest reported experience of feeling disconnected from family were;**

Category Group	Percentage Level
Women living in the Letterkenny Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	79.6%
Living with partner (Civil status)	74.4%
Women between 18-25 years	73.7%
Lone parent living with child/ren (Household status)	72.6%
Women between 26-40 years	72.4%
Married (Civil status)	70.3%

**Category Groups with the highest reported experienced feelings of disconnected from friends were;**

Category Group	Percentage Level
Women between 18-25 years	100%
Women living in the Buncrana Local Electoral Area (the highest % of any LEA)	93.3%
Lives with my parent/s (Household status)	90.9%
Women between 26-40 years	88.5%
Lone parent living with child/ren (Household status)	85.4%
Living with partner (Civil status)	85.1%
Married (Civil status)	82%

**Keeping in contact with people during the pandemic**

Technology continues to play an important role in allowing women to stay socially in contact with their family and friends, when asked the question compared to pre Covid-19 how much time do you feel you now use social technologies e.g.; Zoom, WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook etc, 75.3% of women said More time, 20.2% said the same amount of time and 4.5% said less time. Although good high-speed internet access in Donegal is an issue some.

## Positive impacts experienced by Women

While the pandemic has brought additional challenges and stresses to the lives of women in Donegal it has also created opportunities for positive impacts in their lives and that of their families. When asked the question “Have there been any positive impacts of Covid-19 for you/your family?” 470 women directly answered this question, 17% of these said that there had been no positive impacts experienced. For the remaining 83% of women they reported a range of experienced impacts that they regarded as positive, key areas given by the women centred around the following themes;

- Created different opportunities for a better family life
- Closer relationships formed
- Opportunity for reconnecting with family
- Reflective time/ for self and relationships
- More time
- More quality time
- Less rushing around
- Less travel
- Re prioritising, what's important within life
- Working from home allowed for a better work life balance
- Appreciation
- Better change of attitude
- Online courses

## Quotes from women on the positive impacts experienced

*“A slower pace of living, not having to be constantly on the go, no time for rest and discovering new things.”*

*“As a family we have been spending more time together, that didn't really happen before as there was always one or 2 of us missing each evening or weekends.”*

*“Being able to access some distant theatrical and other events via online platforms that otherwise would not have been possible to attend due to geographic distances; availability of these activities stretched to online in ways they did not formerly. Learning to use new online platforms like Zoom. Being able to participate in online group discussions and fora with less social awkwardness than is sometimes the case due to introversion and social anxiety / depression. Positive feeling of working as a team with my adult son while living together. Being productive in completing creative projects (poetry and visual art).”*

*“Definitely life slowed down, we weren't tasting home after school, rushing to get children fed away to Gaelic/swimming/dancing, back home, homework, supper & bed...life slowed down, we were all home together and it was good.”*

*“For me, remote work has been a positive as I used to have to travel too much with work.”*

*“For myself, I was unemployed at the beginning of the pandemic and I felt a lot of pressure was taken off my shoulders because everyone was suddenly in the same boat. I then found a job which was great, but for me, the first lockdown was the best thing to happen to me.”*

*“I loved being able to relax more - not having as much work, voluntary work or social engagements. It gave me time to re-evaluate what I prioritise in life.”*

*“Less pressure to host visitors when the baby was born and not having to leave house so easier to feed on demand.”*

*“Less rushing about & clock watching. Back to basics which is needed.”*

*“Living in the here and now. Knowing that anxiety is worrying about the future and in the pandemic, we had no control of the future so letting go was freeing in a sense.”*

*“More family time, taking time from work meant I could put perspective on things and work on my mental health, counselling, a now blended approach to work/life balance.”*

*“More time at home. Working from home was a bonus. My job got really busy during the pandemic and would have required long hours at the office. Being at home made the workload more tolerable.”*

*“My husband got to spend time with the kids that he normally would not get. Plus, he was in the house so helped out with a lot of the stuff I would normally have to do.”*

*“My husband has been able to work from home which saves him 2 hours travelling a day. It also means I am now able to work part time as he is now available to do the school runs and is at home all day.”*

*“Slowed down, less taxi-ing to all types of activities; got some home projects complete as a family. More walking and appreciation of where we live, beaches we have access to locally. Kindness when daughter had covid. People offering support, food drop off, her friends baking. Also, how creative youth were in staying connected, in how they made gifts, baked, helped with mask making etc.”*

*“We've come together and experienced time together which we would not otherwise have had. I felt supported and also useful in that I could assist my mum with my dad's care. Now that things are getting slightly easier, I appreciate the little things much more. Seeing friends, coffee, a walk etc. I will try not to take these things for granted again.”*

*“Yes, the first lock-down was rather enjoyable, with the great weather, and having a yard and a bit of garden we were able to keep busy outside when possible. Also, my partner and I know now that we can live together happily even when stuck together for weeks on end! Yes, after being locked in together with my partner, we know that we can take on anything together. I expected at least some arguments/going on each other's nerves, but it didn't happen!”*

*“Yes. A person from our rural town set up a history WhatsApp group for us...something we had spoken about before Covid but Covid gave us the time to reconnect. After a couple of months, we had neighbours and diaspora from all over the town land involved and we all learned so much which is still ongoing but we did collate enough information to set up a website.”*

*“Yes. Appreciating each other, appreciating the simpler things in life, spending less money on unnecessary things we never really needed.”*

*“Yes. I have always worked and for the first time I have been able to work more flexibly and walk the children to school and collect them again. The ability to fit work around my family it's great!”*

## **Personal Learning**

The pandemic period again also seems to have created an opportunity for women to reflect and learn about themselves. When asked the question “Have you learnt anything about yourself since the pandemic began last year?” 448 women responded to this question, of which 10% of these responded by saying that they had not learnt anything about themselves.

Similar to the responses given in the 2020 survey, women's responses to this question centred around, recognising their skills and strengths, with the majority of responses starting with affirmative sentences such as; I am, I can, I enjoy and I have. While others responses centred on new awareness particularly around their mental health with sentences centred on I don't, I can't, I'm not and I need.

Common responses by women centred on the following;

- Recognising their resilience
- That they are stronger than they had realised
- Recognising that they ability to adapt
- Better awareness around their own mental health
- Their creativity
- The importance of making time for themselves
- The need to be more confident
- The things they really enjoy in life
- To ask for help when I need it

## Quotes from some women on what they have learnt about themselves

*A lot. I am very content in nature and in quiet surroundings without many people. I was living a life that wasn't working for me prior to the Pandemic and was not in tune with myself.*

*Ability to adapt and cope. I commenced online adult education*

*Despite being an introvert, I still yearn for even the everyday social interactions*

*How to recognise, monitor and lower my own anxiety. I moved from the theory of to the practice of living in the now.*

*How to reach out for help and support as I can't do it all on my own*

*I am a fighter and can cope with just about anything, and am comfortable in my own skin.*

*I am stronger than I think but no woman is an island. I used to think I was an introvert at heart but the lockdowns have taught me I need social interaction more than I realised. I also learned that I can have fun socialising without alcohol, through for example sea swimming. I also learned that being around nature has a really positive impact on me.*

*I am stronger than I thought. It was ok to ask for help when I was feeling overwhelmed even though my family weren't happy about it as they expected me to do everything but they got used to it after a while. I need to put myself first sometimes.*

*I don't think I will go back to work. May take a career break and spend time with kids*

*I have learned that my work is not more valuable than my home life. No one will die if I don't answer that email until tomorrow. Nothing is that urgent, it can't wait until I get time to do it!*

*I have learned to try to give myself some time to relax and breathe and patience as this is a scary time especially with bringing a little life into the world.*

*I like quiet time but I have to push myself to keep in touch with people or it gets harder to socialise again.*

*I need to make more time for myself away from the business. Very difficult when there is the fear of future lockdown (cases currently rising in my area due to new variants). I feel I need to work harder when business is operating to make up for closures and support the business when not earning*

*I was saying yes to everybody and everything. I am learning how to say no and to listen more than talk.*

*I'm stronger than I thought I was. I never could have imagined labouring alone, having a nearly one year old who hasn't met any of my family, not seeing my family in over two years. I made it through, because I had to.*

*I've learned what my boundaries are when it comes to toxic and negative behaviour in regards to friends and family.*

*I'm a housewife and I feel I was more equipped because I was used to being in the home more than the others in the household.*

*That I desperately need my 'tribe' of friends and like-minded people nearby - video chats and WhatsApp messages just aren't enough. And that when you become a parent, you need a strong support network and that is something I have badly missed.*

*That I find it difficult to say 'no' when asked to help out or do something, even though I'm already very busy.*

*That routine and structure are important. Having the option of eating out on occasion is a sanity saver for me as the main cook.*

*That we don't need to spend money to have fun. I have started doing 1 weekly shop, rather than popping to the shop every day, saving lots of money.*

*I am much more engaged in the decisions our government makes that limit my rights and my freedoms unnecessarily.*

## **Paid Work and Employment**

The June 2020 survey showed that the pandemic had a diverse impact on women's working lives and paid employment. A full year on this remains the case. 43.2% of the women surveyed said that their job became classified as a frontline worker or essential worker. 31.8% of women were now working from home. 17.9% of women saw their job working hours reduced as a result of the pandemic. 12% experienced a job loss as a consequence. 14% received the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. While 4.7% of surveyed women reported a job loss/suspension due to caring responsibilities.

Additional childcare responsibilities during the pandemic have impacted women's paid work and employment greatly. When further asked whether they felt their employer was supportive in understanding how the

pandemic has impacted these responsibilities, of those women the question directly applied to 28% of those women answered NO, an increase from the 24% result in June 2020.

When asked why they felt that their employer has not been supportive, a number of women gave examples of their experiences including, their employer not being flexible with childcare responsibilities, being forced to use annual leave for childcare, with essential workers with children finding it particularly challenging with employers.

### **Quotes from some women on experiences**

*Both myself and my husband work in HSE. We both had to use annual leave to facilitate childcare issues and were not permitted to work from home unlike some of our other colleagues who only had one working front line parent in Covid.*

*I have a set rota at work, our boss decided now was the time to start trying to make us more flexible in hours. I had no childcare solution and my husband had to link in with his boss to have days off that I worked. It wasn't the time to start messing up a schedule. And we had numerous meetings about him causing extra stress to all staff rather than good. We all still can't understand his thinking process.*

*I wasn't allowed to cut my hours and take unpaid leave to allow me to work around a childminder. I was told I had to use my annual leave which would have been 5 hours each week.*

*My line manager has been extremely supportive and understanding but most of that has been out of line with the rest of our company who would have expected much more from the employees.*

*Teachers were expected to teach regardless of what was going on at home.*

*They paid lip service and said we understand but I still felt under pressure and have worked extra hours to try and get work finished.*

*When childcare facilities got closed they didn't agree to let me work evenings and weekends. Instead they suggested that my 11-year-old is big enough to look after a 7-year-old.*

## Supports for Women

As a society responding to the support needs of women will be important for any successful and socially inclusive post Covid-19 community strategy. As such we asked women the question “What supports for women would you like to see put in place post Covid-19 restrictions in Donegal?” Some 380 women responded to this open-ended question, the majority of their responses centred around, better supports for mental health, supports for women with disabilities, maternal health supports, women’s groups, financial, domestic abuse supports, recognition and supports for care roles women have, social engagement and inclusion opportunities, more spaces for women’s groups. Other common responses by women included the following;

- Better access to services
- Counselling
- Carers support
- Childcare supports and better childcare options
- Employment supports
- Financial supports
- Domestic violence supports and Awareness
- Education opportunities
- Friendship groups
- Women’s groups that meet more of women’s lives styles, evening groups
- Carer supports
- Supports for women in business
- Recognition of all the front-line staff
- The representation of the diversity of women
- Family friendly hours offered to parents
- Flexible working hours
- Outdoor activities
- Knowing what supports are out there and how to connect in with them
- Support for working mothers
- Support/info on getting back in shape
- Older women’s groups
- Mindfulness workshops
- Affordable access to counselling and mental health focused workshops
- Awareness of childcare responsibilities.
- Learning how to share family responsibility

### Comments made by women on what supports are needed for women in Donegal

*More groups active and non-active for people with disabilities*

*Imagine many women will need mental health services, help with returning to employment or finding new work.*

*As ever, more access to affordable childcare, perhaps Women's groups that do not revolve around children for childless women such as myself. Likewise access to social and economic support for women with disabilities or*

*who are differently abled. Perhaps more support for those caring for older parents or caring for a partner full time. Even recognition of these groups would be incredible.*

*Better childcare, better pay and conditions for health and care workers. More resources to help women affected by domestic violence, whether that be refuges, counselling, housing support etc*

*Better childcare, more women's groups, book group? Walking group? Arranged nights/lunches out? To feel that we aren't alone.*

*Communities and groups to get women out of the home and back into like-minded social groups - the isolation of mothers and women that lost their jobs or even wife has led to solitary habits and getting back into friend groups or finding someone to talk to is important.*

*Drop in centres, more info evenings about positive mental health. A bigger emphasis to be placed on ourselves and making time for ourselves.*

*Emotional support, educational support and serious confidence boosting. For too long women are carrying the load and still standing behind men instead of beside or in front of them, where this is required. The old school mentality needs to be removed.*

*Have Women's clubs (something like Men's Sheds) where women come together to hang out, that isn't all about children. Also, courses on Mindfulness to alleviate stress and live more in the present.*

*Help for those who lost or left work due to other responsibilities. More open discussion around role balance in the home.*

*Help women show employers that many (esp. with children) would like to avail of part-time work opportunities, and how this might be of benefit to employers. Also, a big topic has been supporting women in the mid-40s/50s to access menopausal care (specifically with HRT) locally from their GPs, as many GPs are untrained.*

*I believe in person support groups should be set up for women, these could be coffee mornings, book clubs, walks or runs. It would be nice for women to have somewhere to go by themselves and have the support of women in similar situations by being married, unmarried, children, childfree, straight or LGBT+.*

*I think more women's nature or outdoor activity-based groups would be something I'd love to see. Being around nature has such a positive impact on me. I also think it might be a good entry point for women who may be facing different types of trauma to connect with other women in a supportive environment.*

*I would love for zoom classes or meetings to continue. I have been able to access so many things from home over zoom that I wouldn't have been able to if I had to travel a distance in the evenings to go to.*

*Increase lobbying and advocating to the government for increased funding for women's organisation particularly to ensure better access for women from BME communities including Traveller and Roma women.*

*Job opportunities, child care for those with younger children, social events for women especially those who will find it difficult to socialise again after so long not being able to.*

*Learning to handle anxiety in returning to work, returning to the public. Learning to cope with strained relationships with family/friends.*

*It would be so good to have better services and information around the Menopause and other women's health issues locally without the huge price of visiting the GP who really isn't interested in talking about little niggling symptoms, and in my experience with 3 different Doctors, don't seem to know much about the Menopause. From my point of view, there needs to be better female health provision - the centre in Letterkenny is the only one available, working full time and living at the other end of the county, I've never managed to get back in there. There seems to be a lack of understanding of anything menopause related in the GPs, even though it will affect half the population one way or another.*

*more education for women, lots of group programs so we can record and share stories.*

*More female only groups such as gyms and exercise classes to make us healthier but in a safer and less judgmental environment.*

*More information about services that are available to support women.*

*More joined up services and access to the same. Not everyone wants to use technology, social media, particularly older people.*

*More support for postnatal depression! Still waiting on someone to phone me over a year later. More support in hospital while having a baby.*

*There needs to be more female only spaces. There needs to be more education around feminism, body shaming, fatphobia, inequality in the work place, intersectional feminism, consent etc - I want to be in an environment where women feel safe and not judged. Where exercise is used for the benefits of mental health and not for dieting.*

## Gender Equality Gaps in Ireland

From a gender lens analysis perspective, some of the challenges and additional stresses experienced by women during the Covid-19 pandemic can be attributed to issues of gender inequality. However, when asked the question do you think Covid-19 has highlighted gender inequality gaps in Ireland, with the given options of; Yes, No and Didn't know. 38.5% of women surveyed said YES, 16% said NO and 45.5% said Don't know.

These 2021 statistics differ from that of the 2020 results where 23.8% of women said YES, 23.9% said NO and 52.3% said they didn't know. And while a year on there now seems to be an increased identification of gender inequality gaps in Ireland by women, the 2021 survey statistics would also indicate that there still remains a lack of understanding as to what gender inequality is and also an inability to identify gender inequality within women's own personal lives. Some of the stated explanations for women's YES answers however included the following identified gender inequality gaps in Ireland;

- Care role responsibilities became more evident and also reinforced
- Increase in unpaid and often invisible work
- Assumptions made that the women within the house will do the childcare/ homeschooling even when there is a partner in the home.
- Home-schooling fell on women
- Lack of women making government decisions during Pandemic
- Some women have been forced to stop working due to childcare issues or use their annual leave.
- Women's health services impacted and appointments such as smear tests and breast checks delayed
- Material health and going through pregnancy care appointments often alone
- because restrictions didn't allow their partner to attend.
- Expectation that the woman will do it
- Women were more likely to be in jobs that were impacted by closures
- Unequal distribution of housework/running the home
- Struggling working and childcare fell on women
- Working from home and homeschooling
- The majority of front-line workers and those in the caring health sector are women and therefore most exposed and impacted by lack of childcare during the restrictions.
- Increase in domestic violence towards women (gender-based violence)
- Reinforced gender stereotypes within households and the wider society

## Quotes from women on what they see as gender inequality issues

*"A lot of men able to just carry on life almost as normal whereas women mostly left with the home schooling, childcare etc"*

*"A lot of, if not most things in the home are still left to women regardless of the outside situation. Listening to (female) friends and colleagues, they had to work from home while doing most of the housework, homeschool kids, and be their usual friendly self! They also had to ask for more understanding from their employers, and juggle things a lot more than their partners."*

*"Absolutely - women have increased responsibility in the household particularly during COVID-19 including home schooling children - this is unpaid work that is done and it's not seen as important work by the government or 'invisible work'. The burden is put on women to ensure everything is running in the household including managing the home/ bills/food/shopping etc - particularly there is a burden for lone parents who are women and for women living in poverty particularly Traveller and Roma women."*

*"Although I was redeployed I felt it was my responsibility to organise childcare and school was contacting me re: homework not handed in and not my husband."*

*"At work it's noticeable that men had to take little /no time off due to childcare."*

*"Being a mum, I was so torn with my job responsibilities and parent responsibilities."*

*"COVID-19 showed that the majority of caring, retail, Child care professionals are women in lower paid jobs which were essential for our country and economy to cope with the pandemic especially at the early stages."*

*"Domestic work, childcare, elders care largely seemed to have fallen on women during the Pandemic. Yes, across every aspect of Irish society starting in the home. From talking to some friends, there was an organic assumption that they'd take most of the responsibility for childcare & domestic duties despite both being at home. Really - the Mothers & Fathers of Ireland need to educate children at home by leading by example so that we can make some progression in this country around gender equality."*

*"Effects of the shecession - women being furloughed before men, women giving up their jobs due to caring & childcare duties, women's businesses (retail, hospitality, beauty, hairdressing) more badly affected by lockdowns."*

*"Equality in the household, in my experience with both partners in a household off work during the pandemic, I as a woman was still expected to run and maintain the household while my partner didn't lift a finger, this is the*

*case with many of my friends too, even though both partners are in the same situation, one (woman) is expected to do more than the other (man)."*

*I could not go back to work post maternity as childcare was unavailable for shift work.*

*I feel like women's health isn't as important or the support that pregnant women need from their partners wasn't important.*

*I feel that most if not all of the childcare responsibilities have fallen on women, which throughout Covid also involved homeschooling on top of all of the "normal" household duties. Many women were also having to work from home at the same time.*

*I think people having to homeschool has shown what a lot of women and mothers often have to balance, along with working full time, on a normal basis.*

*I was turned down for a job recently because of the hours I was available to work owing to caring responsibilities. Strangely my husband, who is in the same caring role, has had no problem at all*

*Increase in domestic violence. Increased care responsibilities in childcare, homeschooling and housework . Employment opportunities have been negatively affected due to the above. Worsening mental health among women in rural areas, disadvantaged communities, minority groups.*

*increase in violence against women, many healthcare workers and care workers are women and were on the frontline, and not well protected or paid.*

*It has exacerbated existing discrepancies and women, who already were doing a disproportionate amount of household tasks, are now doing even more.*

*It has highlighted just how much pressure and stress women are under when it comes to running a home, looking after children and working all at the same time. we are expected to facilitate the lives of everyone around us and still make time for ourselves, we are expected to just keep going, to keep things running smoothly no matter what. The pressure to perform is intense and I feel like women are way more affected by this than men.*

*It's fun for men to have their children on zoom calls or they are seen as great dads. For women it's unprofessional.*

*Look at the line-up of the health experts. Males dominate.*

*“Majority of women had to work from home but also expected to homeschool their own kids and keep house at the same time!! With everyone at home more time was spent preparing food, cleaning and laundry.”*

*“Majority of women still undertake caring/childcare responsibilities in addition to other commitments. I guess it became evident how much so during Covid.”*

*“My ex-husband had no issue continuing work unhindered and I all but lost my self-employed professional practice due to childcare and emergency education needs. He got to earn an income and I didn't and myself and my child lost out considerably. I'm sure I'm not the only one feeling that.”*

*“My husband's employer didn't acknowledge his caring responsibilities as expected by the woman to do it.”*

*“Once myself and my partner both had to work from home all home schooling and childcare during office hours fell to me. My partner said he couldn't because he was working and his job was more important. Can imagine the row that caused.”*

*“When Covid hit, women had to give up the most. A lot gave up their jobs to look after children, especially homeschooling. A lot of times it's expected that women give up their careers to take care of children. I am lucky my husband is very supportive and helps as much as he can.”*

*“Whilst I'm working from home full-time I find that others generally assume that I'm just at home and therefore can take on full time family caring duties, shopping duties, cooking and cleaning duties and I have assumed those roles. It has made for an easier way of life for my family but I'm tired.”*

*“Women are expected to take the days off work relating to childcare. To take on the sole responsibility of deciding if a child should not go to school and how they will be cared for if not going in.”*

*“Women were sacrificed, they took over the caring homeschooling responsibilities, their needs were compromised by the changes due to COVID restrictions. Many women work in front line services so they had to juggle all the extra responsibilities too.”*

## Conclusions

The 2021 Covid-19 follow up survey findings provides some insight to the lived experiences of women a year into the pandemic. The data gathered highlights that women have and continue to experience unique impacts due to the pandemic. Creating additional stresses for women and adding pressures to existing gender inequalities and gender stereotypes.

The women who took part in the survey talked about a number of issues and challenges they have faced over the past year. Which included dealing with additional household workload, increased caring responsibilities, going through pregnancy during the pandemic, and dealing with health challenges. Many of these women talked about the additional workload and the challenge of balancing working from home and childcare, expectations. Home-schooling was a particular issue raised by women, many stated that they had experienced an assumption by their partner that it would be them who would look after home-schooling. Which was a cause of frustration for women.

Women reported an overwhelming increase in the impact of the pandemic on their mental health in this survey compared with the 2020 findings. While women have reported adapting to living with the pandemic, a question that must be asked is at what cost to their long-term mental health? Is this adaptation and change sustainable in the long term or even fair? And is there significant capacity within mental health support services locally to meet future demand?

While the survey also highlights that women have also come to learn, develop, be resilient and adapt to living through the pandemic. Some women have experienced opportunities to develop and be innovative i.e. engaging in online learning and using technology for social and community engagement, which has allowed them to engage in new opportunities they may not have been able to in the past, due to travel distances or caring responsibilities.

The survey findings would further indicate that there needs to be a better understanding about gender inequality and its impact on women's lives. The findings highlight that the majority of childcare responsibilities are falling onto women, that within households there is an assumption it will be the woman who is solely responsible for this area of work. While there may be situations where this is agreed upon, the vast majority of the experiences expressed by women would indicate that there is often no agreement within relationships but rather an assumption.

Such assumptions are likely built by continued held social gender stereotypes, that a woman's role is to look after the children and family home. Such stereotypes are detrimental to achieving gender equality and the healthy sustainable development of our society.

It is also important to acknowledge that we cannot generalise these findings to all women in the county. For example, due to limited capacity we could only provide the survey in the English Language and we were unable to conduct in person outreach survey work with women in the county who for example English may have been a barrier to completing the survey or women who would be at a higher risk of experiencing marginalisation and disadvantage.

Donegal is home to a number of families from Syria and Iraq under the Refugee Resettlement Programme. In addition to families living in the self-catering centre for asylum seekers in Letterkenny. While Ethnic groups who were experiencing marginalisation in Donegal prior to Covid-19 include members of the Traveller and the Roma community. Women from within any of these groups or communities will therefore likely in their own right have unique lived experiences and impacts experienced during the pandemic and this is not directly captured within the survey.

## Recommendations

The survey data highlights that the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified gender inequality challenges as well as potentially reverting some of the achievements made to close inequality gaps. It is therefore important that gender equality is a fundamental measure in any Covid-19 response strategies by decision-making bodies and the community sector locally here in Donegal and nationally. The experiences and information shared by women living here in Donegal provide community organisations and decision-making bodies valuable insight and data to help inform working responses, ongoing and future Covid-19 community recovery plans.

Many of the issues identified by women in the 2021 survey collocate to those that were raised in the 2020 survey, the recommendations raised then still apply to the findings of this latest research. Actions that must be considered and taken should include;

- The inclusion of gender perspectives in any planning and decision making in relation to the development of any pandemic recovery policies. Policies must be needs-led, they must take into consideration the differing lived experiences between men and women in Donegal. While recognising the diversity of women and their experiences. Recognising and understanding that women's differing circumstances will further inform how they have been impacted by Covid-19 pandemic.
- Local authority bodies such as Donegal County Council need to ensure that women have an equal voice in decision making in ongoing and future covid-19 recovering planning.
- Local strategies need to be developed that help address the potential added economic impacts the pandemic has had on women.

- Additional funding and investment are needed for local mental health support services, to meet this growing demand. Mental health strategies should be community led with the development of local area support networks.
- Provide local support to women's groups and women centred services in Donegal who have access to women and who with additional sources of funding could run courses and workshops for women in support of their health and wellbeing and help address isolation and loneliness being experienced.
- Employers need to be more supportive of the balance of responsibilities women with children have, employers in Donegal should actively be adopting family friendly and gender equality working policies.
- With job losses, self-employment options could be a good means for women to gain employment and provide a flexible solution to their caring responsibilities and provide economic independence. As such there needs to be more support put in place to support self-employment opportunities and training for women in the county. Taking into consideration the predevelopment support work that may be required with women to give them the confidence and skills required to become self-employed.
- There needs to be greater support for women who are primary caregivers and now want to return to paid employment after the pandemic. We have found that some women find that their confidence is a barrier to finding employment and don't recognise the skills that they have and are therefore not applying these to the job market. Employment services need to adopt a gender lens when supporting women to re-enter the employment market.
- Additional support funding to services that work to prevent and respond to domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence areas.
- As we continue to learn to live with around Covid-19 and public health measures we must ensure that we are adopting measures and a way of living that supports the growth of gender equality and does not reinforce gender inequality structures.

## Acknowledgements

NCCWN Donegal Women's Network would like to thank and acknowledge all the women who took the time to complete our county Covid-19 Impact Survey. Their time and insightful input are very much appreciated. Your shared experiences will help inform our work in 2022, where we will continue to support women throughout and beyond this pandemic.

If you would like to know further information about NCCWN Donegal Women's Network and our work please visit [donegalwomensnetwork.org](http://donegalwomensnetwork.org) or email us on [donegal@womenscollective.ie](mailto:donegal@womenscollective.ie)



**An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige**  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth