

# Wanting to 'move on' is natural—but women's pandemic experiences can't be lost to 'lockdown amnesia'

January 10 2024, by Holly Thorpe, Grace O'Leary, Mihi Joy Nemani and Nida Ahmad

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The COVID-19 pandemic was—and continues to be—hugely disruptive and stressful for individuals, communities and countries. Yet many seem

desperate to close the chapter entirely, almost as if it had never happened.

This desire to [forget and move on](#)—labeled "[lockdown amnesia](#)" by some—is understandable at one level. But it also risks missing the opportunity to learn from what happened.

And while various official inquiries and royal commissions have been established to examine the wider government responses (including in New Zealand), the experiences of ordinary people are equally important to understand.

As researchers interested in [women](#) and [gender roles](#), we wanted to capture some of this. For the past three years, our research has focused on what happened to everyday women during this period of uncertainty and disruption—and what lessons might be learned.

## **Pandemic amnesia**

Individual memory can become vague as time goes on. But this can also be affected by broader narratives (in the media or official responses) that overwrite our own recollections of the pandemic.

Political calls to "[live with the virus](#)," and [media hesitancy](#) to publish COVID-related stories due to perceived audience fatigue, can create a collective sense of needing to "move on." Looking back, it can be seen as questionable or even attacked.

Indeed, misinformation and disinformation have been used, [in words](#) of leading pandemic social scientist Deborah Lupton, to "challenge science and manufacture dissent against attempts to tackle [such] crises." But as the memory scholar [Sydney Goggins has put it](#), such "public forgetting leads to a cascade of impacts on policy and social well-being."

## A gendered pandemic

Responding to the rapidly changing social, cultural, and [economic impacts](#) of the pandemic, feminist scholars have highlighted the particular [physical and emotional toll](#) on women worldwide.

This has included [social isolation and loneliness](#), increased [domestic and emotional labor](#), the rise in [domestic and gender-based violence](#), [job losses and financial insecurity](#). Black, Indigenous, minority, and [migrant women](#) have [felt these impacts](#) particularly keenly.

The [same trends](#) have been observed in Aotearoa New Zealand. And whereas some countries embraced pandemic recovery strategies that recognized these [gender differences](#), this hasn't been the case in New Zealand.

The gendered abuse of women leaders—former prime minister Jacinda Ardern and scientist [Siouxsie Wiles](#), for example—have been well documented. But the experiences of ordinary women, their struggles and strategies to look after themselves and others, have had much less attention.

## Experiences of everyday women

Our study involved 110 women in Aotearoa New Zealand. We set out to understand how they adapted their everyday practices—work, leisure, exercise, sport—to maintain or regain well-being, social connections and a sense of community.

Despite many differences between the women in our sample, there were also shared experiences. We referred to the ruptures in the patterns, rhythms and routines of their lives as "[gender arrhythmia](#)".

The women responded to the psycho-social and physical challenges, such as disrupted sleep or weight changes, by creating counter-rhythms—taking up hobbies, exercising, changing diet.

The pandemic also prompted many to reflect on how their pre-pandemic routines and rhythms had caused various forms of "alienation": from their own health and well-being, meaningful social connections, ethical and sustainable work practices, and pleasure.

The disruption of the pandemic caused many to reevaluate the importance of work in their lives. As one reflected:

"COVID-19 has made me reassess what is the most important thing. Is it making money? Actually, no, not at all."

Others were prompted to question and challenge the gendered demands on women to "do everything" and "be everywhere" for everyone:

"I think as women, because we're so good at multitasking, we just put so much on our plates. I think we need to learn just to say no, because we're not superhuman. And ultimately, all of this responsibility is weighing us down."

Our research also highlighted how the pandemic affected women's relationships with [familiar spaces and places](#). Leaving home for a walk, run or bike ride became important everyday practices that proved highly beneficial for most women's subjective well-being.

Some came to [appreciate physical activity](#) for the general joys of movement and connection with people and places, rather than simply to achieve particular goals like fitness or weight loss.

## Special challenges for young women

As part of our overall project, we also [focused on 45 young women](#) (aged 16 to 25). This highlighted the importance of recognizing how gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic circumstances intersect.

Listening to their [pandemic stories](#), we found young women played important roles in supporting their families and communities.

In particular, Māori, Pacific and others from diverse ethnic or migrant backgrounds carried increased responsibilities in the home, including childcare, cleaning, cooking and shopping. While many did so willingly, these extra burdens took a toll on their schooling, mental health and well-being.

For many [young women](#), the pandemic was a radical disruption to their everyday lives and routines during a critical stage of identity development. They missed key milestones and events, and crucial phases of education and social development.

Many still grieve for some of those losses. And some are struggling to rebuild [social connections](#), motivation and aspirations.

For example, some described being passionate and aspiring athletes before the pandemic. But social anxieties and body-image issues left over from lockdowns have been hard to shake, and have seen them [struggle to return](#) to sport.

## The invisible work of migrant women

We also looked deeply at the experiences of [12 middle-class migrant women](#), and how prolonged border closures created real anxiety about

"not being there" for families overseas.

As one nurse working on the front line of COVID care in NZ explained:

"About a year ago, the cases of COVID in my homeland were increasing so rapidly. My family were not very well and I was depending on social media [...] trying to reach out to them. I was really scared at that time, not being able to see your family when they really need you, not being able to be with them."

Some of the women in our sample also experienced [increased anti-immigrant sentiments](#) which further affected their health and well-being—and their feelings of belonging. As one said,

"I've become extremely sensitive. I cry about small things. My doctor said 'go and get some fresh air, it's good for you' [...] I went outside for a walk, and someone shouted at me, screamed at me. I got terrified for my life. How do you expect me to have well-being when no one in the society accepts you?"

This arm of the research suggests a real need for [investment in policies and support strategies](#) specifically for migrant women and their communities in any future global health emergency.

## Communities of care

A key feature of our study was the highly creative ways women cultivated "[communities of care](#)" during the pandemic. Even when they were struggling themselves, they reached out to friends and family—and particularly other women.

The majority of our participants were prompted to think differently about their own health and well-being and what is important in their lives

(now and in the future).

Throughout the pandemic, women have worked quietly, behind the scenes, in their families, communities, and workplaces, supporting their own and others' health and well-being. This invisible labor is rarely acknowledged or celebrated.

Many still feel the toll of economic hardship, violence, and exhaustion. And less tangible feelings of disillusionment remain in a society that has so quickly "moved on" from the pandemic.

Acknowledging and addressing [pandemic](#) amnesia—personal and collective—is an important first step in documenting, learning from, and using these experiences to [better prepare for future events](#). Next time, we need to ensure the necessary support is available for those most in need.

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