## Executive Summary

**Background**

Members of the recently formed Empowering Women Panel carried out peer research in August and September 2023 to learn more about how the cost of living crisis was affecting seldom heard women. The work was carried out at the request of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, which was set up by the Scottish Government in 2017 to tackle gender inequality, to help them explore the Scottish Government response to the crisis.

The Panel, who are supported by the social enterprise Sleeping Giants, took part in interview training and set up a sub-group to develop the interview questions. Panel members were also given the opportunity to share their own experiences of the cost of living crisis through Panel meetings and discussions with their mentors. 42 women and non-binary people took part.

**Key Learning 1: What was changing and how it was affecting women**

Women were asked about the changes they had noticed, why they thought they were happening and how they had been affected by them. All those taking part had noticed an increase in the cost of living and particularly in their weekly grocery shop and energy bills. Price increases were also reported in childcare, travel, mortgage payments, rent and other household items.

The impact of these changes was experienced differently. Some women had been able to absorb the additional costs with little or no changes to their household budget but often reported being more aware of what they were spending or the struggles faced by others in their community.

For other women though, the impact was more severe and they had to find ways to reduce their spending or increase their income (e.g. by taking on a second job or part time job). Managing household budgets was particularly difficult where women had been struggling to pay bills before the current crisis hit. These women faced difficult decisions about which basic living expenses to go without. Examples of the actions taken to reduce costs included:

* Reducing energy use;
* Missing meals;
* Changes in how or where they shopped (e.g. buying less or cheaper items);
* Reducing or stopping their own social activities or their child’s activities; and
* Changing childcare arrangements (e.g. reducing working hours to cut costs).

Multiple factors were thought to be responsible for the increasing costs including:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pound with solid fill | Payroll with solid fill | Covid-19 with solid fill | Soldier female with solid fill | Exit with solid fill | Bank with solid fill |
| **Inflation** | **Low wages or wages that weren’t increasing in line with prices** | **Covid-19 Pandemic** | **War in Ukraine** | **Brexit** | **Government policies** |

While specific government policies were mentioned (e.g. Liz Truss’ economic policy impact on interest rates), women most often referred to people in power lacking awareness of or concern for those who were struggling with costs. These women thought the government didn’t provide the support vulnerable members of society needed and were frustrated by the growing gap between the rich and poor. The system was perceived to work against poorer people and prevent them from moving out of poverty.

**Key Learning 2: The impact of the cost of living**

The changes brought about by the cost of living were reported to damage mental health. The constant worry about whether they could afford to pay their bills meant that some women experienced financial stress. The winter period was especially difficult and approached with a sense of dread by those who struggled with heating costs.

Women were socialising less often because they couldn’t afford to go out with friends and parents had cut back on their child’s activities. Community groups and organisations too were perceived to be struggling with increased costs. Where they were forced to close or reduce their activities because of this, local communities lost support and volunteering opportunities. These changes are increasing the exclusion experienced by the poorest people.

Those taking part in both the peer research and Panel discussions described how different identities intersect to create multiple layers of disadvantage which meant that the impact of the cost of living crisis was worsened for some women. For example:

* Cultural differences can mean some minority ethnic and minority faith groups face stigma around asking for help, which makes it more difficult to access cost of living and mental health support;
* Women of colour have faced discrimination when applying for jobs, creating a barrier to increasing household incomes;
* Disabled people and carers face hidden costs. These include electricity usage to power equipment or having to buy ready meals because they’re unable to cook from scratch;
* LGBT+ people often earn less and therefore have lower household incomes; and
* Women who experience abuse might be less able to leave their partner because of the costs of leaving and living on a single income.

Other factors, that cut across intersectional identities, also worsened the effects of the cost of living crisis for some women. For example, women living in houses with poor energy efficiency ratings faced higher heating costs and in rural areas, where journeys are typically longer, women are disproportionately affected by increased public transport costs. In addition, for women with younger children, the costs of childcare created inequalities and prevented them from accessing employment and education.

**Key Learning 3: What was helping**

While help with the costs of energy bills was the most commonly mentioned support received, some thought it did little to cover the increased costs. Others didn’t benefit because they had a prepayment meter and either weren’t aware of the support available or unable to use the voucher to help with heating costs because it was issued as a voucher for their electricity meter (when they had gas central heating).

Where other help had been provided, it was most often by a local community group or charity. For example, food banks, a church run school uniform scheme or youth group run cooking sessions were all reported to have helped. However, some government funded support schemes were also reported – most of which was in place before the current cost of living crisis but now labelled as part of the Scottish Government’s £3billion support package. This included payments from Social Security Scotland for looking after a child, local authority school clothing grants, and free bus travel.

**Key Learning 4: What could help**

A broad range of actions were suggested to help women with the cost of living crisis including:

* Community based support

Community groups and charities were identified as providing a space where women and girls could come together and support each other. Some of the more specific suggested actions included the creation of community hubs, time banks, clothes swap schemes and community cooking days.

* Increasing income:

Increased wages and extended benefit thresholds were called for to help those with a low income but not receiving support. More generally, women wanted incomes to increase in line with the cost of living.

* Provision of free, discounted or subsidised goods and services:

For example, school uniforms, food, winter clothing, improved single person council tax discounts and better fuel subsidies. Also, for those living in rural aeras, help with the cost of transport.

* Help with childcare:

More help with childcare costs was identified as necessary to remove barriers to employment and opportunity.

* Better access to support and information about what was available:

Various actions were suggested to ensure people could access the support they needed, such as one stop shops and single points of contact.

* Tackling the gap between the richest and poorest:

In recognition of the frustrations about the growing gap, some women wanted more redistribution of wealth through, for example, profit sharing schemes.

More broadly, women wanted to ensure that, whatever support was provided, women were treated with dignity and respect. They also wanted to be listened to so that their experience could be used to develop solutions that worked.

**Next Steps – Holding the Scottish Government to Account**

The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, who asked the Panel to carry out this work, are looking at the Scottish Government’s response to the cost of living crisis. The Council will discuss the response with Scottish Government ministers and directors at an accountability event. The findings from the peer research and Panel discussions will be discussed at this event. Beyond this, Panel members will choose how they want to share and use the findings to bring about change.