



Impact of COVID-19 on Scotland's Sikh community-  
An investigation through community research

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This project was funded by The National Lottery Fund's 'Awards for All' funding programme for the purpose of investigating the social, wellbeing and economic impacts of COVID-19 on the Scottish Sikh community. We are grateful to the funders in supporting such essential research which provides a contemporary insight into the Sikh community. The research was conducted between March to September 2020. The study was organised by a team of Sikh Sanjog staff and a consultant.
- The research focused on the five themes of employment, education, mental health, faith, and the public's perception of government response to the pandemic.
- This research was a baseline assessment of the impact of the pandemic in the early stages. In addition to data collected from current projects the findings of this study will inform the direction of the future work of the organisation.
- The research method included three ways of data collection; surveys, focus groups and telephone interviews.
- Under the theme of employment, surveyed members of the Sikh community found that a third experienced substantial hardships through loss of jobs and lost economic opportunities due to lockdown restrictions. There was also a gendered impact of job losses with nearly fifty percent of the women that were in jobs before the pandemic suffering job losses.
- The data collected on education highlighted the experiences of those within education and the experiences of parents whose wards are in education. Across both segments the restrictions from the pandemic were felt strongly where respondents

reported 'feeling disadvantaged' by the additional burdens created by lockdowns and closure of educational institutes.

- Mental health concerns featured highly in the survey responses, where the respondents self-reported a decline in the state of their mental health, compared to pre-pandemic times.
- The closure of places of worship due to the pandemic lockdown measures had a substantial impact on the continuity of social connections and wellbeing of the respondents.
- Public perception of government handling of the pandemic crises was mixed. The survey responses indicated that Scottish Government's performance was more favourable compared to the UK Government's.

# INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has changed the lives of billions across the globe in many ways. Whether it is the way people work, how they spend time on leisure activities, connecting with friends and family, or experiencing life's milestones such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals. The pandemic has touched us all. For some working from home brought on new opportunities, others took up new hobbies such as baking and cooking, where digital meetings became the norm for others, and for many others pandemic related illnesses and deaths ripped families, communities, and nations apart. In all this one thing on thing that has been constant is the inequality. Our fight against the pandemic has highlighted that COVID-19 has affected communities unequally, with some communities experiencing hardship much more than others.

In 2020 when the pandemic and lockdowns unfolded in Scotland and in the rest of the UK, grass roots organisations such as Sikh Sanjog, had to change the way they operated overnight from front facing, relationship building organisations to rapid response, digitally inclusive service providers, thus inadvertently becoming the lifeline of the society. They achieved this through keeping the social connections going, or through identifying rapidly evolving community needs and responding to them with essential services such as helplines, food parcel services and hardship advocacy support. While the pandemic restrictions were in place, we witnessed disadvantaged and isolated communities getting further marginalised due to a sudden stop in in-person activities. This resulted in people encountering further barriers when they tried to access essential services. They faced digital exclusion whether it was due to lack of IT equipment or digital skills, they experienced financial poverty due to sudden job losses, furlough, struggling businesses and time poverty due to increased caring and other responsibilities at home. Furthermore, several pandemic impact reports confirmed what Black Minority Ethnic (BME)

organisations had questioned and highlighted all along, that in addition to higher death rates of BME communities in comparison to White ethnic groups (Public Health England, 2020), BME communities were also experiencing COVID-19 related social, health care and economic disruptions disproportionately.

There is substantial evidence that COVID-19 has had an unequal impact on those from the BME communities. Papers such as the Scottish Government's 'Impacts of COVID-19 on Equality in Scotland', indicate that the BME communities in Scotland have experienced harsher economic effects of the pandemic, including BME women facing adverse long term economic effects, which go beyond the lockdown and other restrictions phase. Another example is the analysis by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health and Policy Scotland, which suggests that the pandemic impact has been exacerbated across areas of 'health, employment, income, opportunity and access to health services'. The evidence also indicates that the BME communities have experienced disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 related deaths. Long deep-seated systemic issues have resulted in the BME communities finding it harder to access essential services during the pandemic. Additionally, economic and physical vulnerability and risk of exposure to the virus is likely to be higher for individuals from the BME communities as they are more likely to be employed in frontline 'key worker' roles within sectors such as essential retail and healthcare.

## **Organisation Background**

Sikh Sanjog was established in 1989 with the core aim to support women of the Bhatra Sikh community to integrate into broader Scottish society. Over the years we have transitioned from being an exclusively Sikh organisation into one which includes the wider BME community in Edinburgh. Our key objective is to engage with the most disadvantaged minority ethnic people with a particular focus on young people and women. Our services focus on linking marginalised Sikh and other BME women to social, educational and employment opportunities with the objective of building their confidence and

developing their potential. Thereby leading to better life chances and the realisation of their human rights. Key activities within the organisation are centred around health and wellbeing, capacity building and advocacy support for women and young people, wellbeing services for men and training and tailored advice on equalities and cultural sensitivity for external stakeholders.

As a grass roots charity that works with marginalised women and young people Sikh Sanjog experienced an increase in demand for its services, such as delivering emergency food parcels to people with health and economic vulnerabilities, and digital inclusion services during the pandemic. Through various lockdowns and COVID-19 social restriction measures several of our service users took on additional responsibilities of care, including home schooling children, and therefore further withdrew from community activities. To respond to rapidly evolving community needs, where women were getting further isolated due to additional responsibilities, Sikh Sanjog decided to map those needs through a community research study in the earlier stage of the pandemic in 2020. This report compiles and analyses the knowledge gained through listening to the community.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Scope of the research** - The research study focused on six areas of enquiry: employment, mental health, education, faith, government response to the pandemic and lockdowns and/or lockdown restrictions.
- **Research method** - The study was carried out through three surveys, three focus groups and thirty telephone follow ups. The surveys investigated the impact of the pandemic on the Scottish Sikh community from the months of March to December 2020.
- The first survey, set in summer, covered the themes of employment, mental health, education, faith and government response to the pandemic. The survey contained thirty-five questions. Link to the questionnaire is available here- [bit.ly/3Kr0kmv](https://bit.ly/3Kr0kmv)
- The second survey, set in autumn, analysed the effect of the 'eat out to help out' scheme and the easing of restrictions of the first lockdown.
- The third survey, set in autumn and winter, examined the introduction of the 'rule of 6' and local lockdowns. In addition to the survey questions several respondents provided free text comments, extracts of which have been included in the report.
- **Limitation of the study**- Sikh Sanjog primarily works with marginalised and disadvantaged members of the community. A key constraint of the study was connecting with the community remotely as in-person activities were not possible. Due to the relational nature of the work most of our community intelligence is drawn from having in-person conversations. This is because some of the respondents who were digitally excluded were likely to be more vulnerable and did not have the means to respond to



the online questionnaire. To address this the research team made call outs discussed the questionnaire and took the feedback over the phone.

- **Demographics of the respondents-** A total of ninety-two responses were received on the surveys. Of which sixty-six were female, twenty-five were male and one respondent preferred not disclose their gender. Twenty respondents were first generation migrants (migrated from their country of origin), fifty-two were second generation migrants (respondents born in this country whose parents were first generation migrants), fifteen were third generation migrants (respondents and their parents born in the UK) and five were from the fourth generation (respondents, their parents and grandparents all born in the UK). Twelve participants contributed across the three focus groups.

# EMPLOYMENT

COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on employment and the economy. Countries across the globe have struggled to limit the impact of this pandemic on their economies. Scotland has also felt the economic ripple, which in return affected communities' financial capacity, including the Sikh community.

## Summary of data

- **A third of the employed (including full time and part time) respondents lost their jobs during the pandemic.** The reasons for loss of employment ranged from lack of roles in their chosen area of work, an inability to work in-person one to one with clients due to pandemic restrictions, companies downsizing and subsequently there wasn't enough temporary work available. People also lost their jobs because of companies closing down and then there were people on furlough at reduced wage rates with their jobs at risk once furlough ended. There were specific sectors such as cleaning sector, property and hospitality sector which seem to have negatively affected the respondents finances and income earning capacity.
- A third of the survey respondents reported that they felt they were financially disadvantaged because of COVID-19 and the lockdowns.
- 45% of the survey respondents felt that measures such as the furlough scheme and support with mortgage payment supported them financially, where nearly 49% respondents stated that they felt the information on the measures were communicated properly. Feedback from one respondent on how the government scheme benefitted *'Being furloughed meant I did not have to be*

*made redundant my company is back to normal with the help of the scheme and my contract is back to full time due to business pick up'.*

- Around 10% of the respondents felt that the schemes were not of any help financially and were not fit for purpose. Reasons for this included not having access to the information, not knowing about the measures, the application process being too complicated and any information that was given was too vague to understand if they qualified for the help or not. 29% of the survey respondents reported they were not able to understand the measures properly. A recommendation on this is to have an equality impact assessment done for future emergency measures, where information and application processes of these measures are inclusive and accessible to the intended beneficiaries.
- **The survey data also highlights the gendered impact of the pandemic on employment, within the Scottish Sikh community.** Nearly 60% of the female respondents were in employment before the pandemic. This dropped by 33% in the earlier stage of the pandemic with 18% placed on furlough.

# EDUCATION

At this point the survey has been split into two lines of enquiry to assess the impact of COVID-19 on those within education (students) and the parents of those within education. As these questions do not apply to all completing the survey the number of respondents answering this section is lower than the response rate within the rest of the report.

## Summary of data

- 10.7% of respondents were children of key workers.
- 7.1% of respondents felt disadvantaged by the lockdowns and the closures of schools, colleges and universities. Reasons for feeling disadvantaged were increase in competing demands in the home front with care giving duties and unpaid household labour.
- Regarding preparedness of parents for home schooling, 16% of the respondents reported that they had been well prepared, 24% that they were moderately prepared, and 60% reported not feeling prepared at all.
- With regards to guidance issued to students during the pandemic and lockdown, 16% felt not much guidance had been issued or had been of any use, 48% felt the guidance was of moderate use and 36% reported the guidance to be extremely helpful.
- **Respondents stated the lack of structure and guidance from the school and decreased ability of students to concentrate in home settings meant there was low motivation at home.** The high volume of work given to students sitting highers and the lack of certainty over grading systems also contributed to the concern from parents.

- One respondent stated *'My daughter would have been sitting her NAT5s instead she will receive predicted grades and has been receiving a large amount of work daily for studying highers. Quite a stressful time for my family. Although there have been meetings and lessons with teachers, the pace at what new subjects were being taught at were concerning. Students not having that face-to-face conversation with teachers has also had a big impact on my daughter's learning'*.

# MENTAL HEALTH

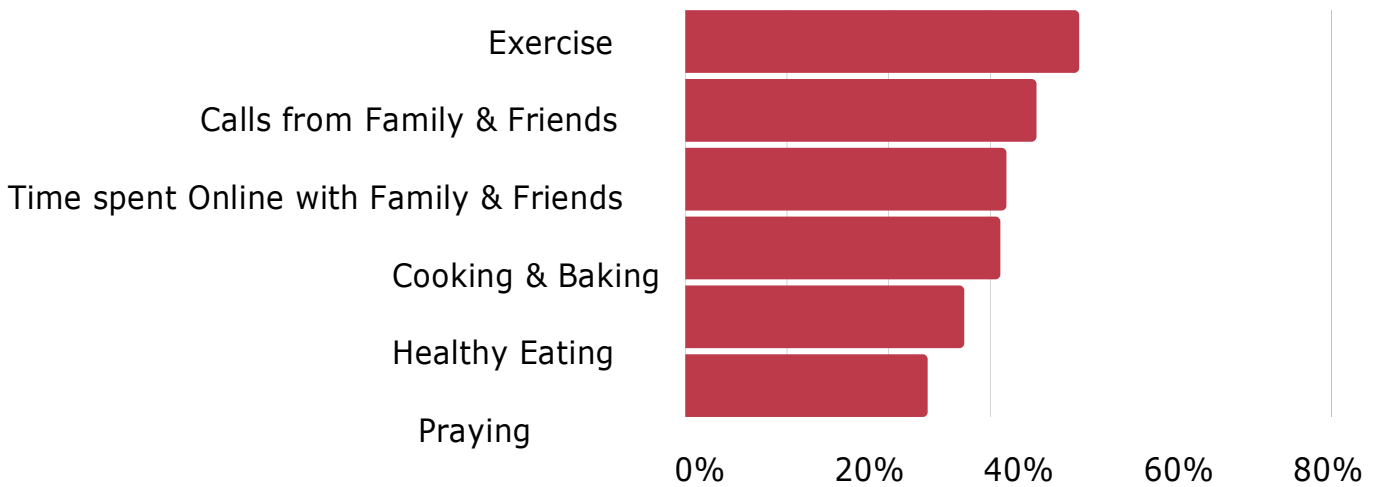
Survey respondents reported a self-assessed significant decline in their mental health during COVID-19 compared to pre-pandemic levels.

## Summary of data

- 39.1% of respondents rated their mental health and well-being as 'very good' before COVID-19 and lockdown. This dropped down to 19.7% of respondents feeling the same during the pandemic.
- 54.7% of respondents shared that they had trouble sleeping, 34% had persistent lack of energy and 11.3% felt highly self-critical during COVID-19.
- **When asked which factors contributed to this shift in mental health issues during lockdown the majority of respondents stated the uncertainty of the pandemic, increased isolation and loneliness, feeling scared and fear for family member's health (particularly those who were elderly and key workers), not having physical contact with loved ones, the lack of routine and the pressures of working from home and caring responsibilities.**
- However, respondents of the survey showed great resilience in improving their mental health and wellbeing, with 91.2% of respondents stating that they were actively trying to improve their well-being and mental health during the first lockdown.
- When asked to comment on services or methods of support that were particularly helpful most respondents listed online adverts for well-being, praying and meditation and yoga.
- In terms of support services, the majority of respondents found

support from family and friends the most helpful with support from faith communities the least helpful.

- In addition to this culture specific support services such as Sikh Sanjog charity, Panjab radio and support from family and friends were also mentioned.



**Activities which helped service users improve wellbeing during the pandemic**

# FAITH

The announcement of the closure of places of worship came as a shock to many including members of the Sikh community. The effect of closures of places of worship cannot be underestimated within the Sikh community. 'Gurudwaras' which are Sikh temples are not only religious hubs embodying equality and justice but are also at the heart of the community's social network. Activities such as 'langar' (community meal), 'Gurmukhi' (Punjabi language) lessons and other culturally relevant projects provide the space for the community to come together. The community space is particularly relevant to the socially isolated and marginalised members of the community and acts as an informal network of information and support.

## **Summary of data**

- 39% of the respondents visited the Gurudwara occasionally, 28% once a week and 21% more than once a week. 10% of the respondents said that they never visited the Gurudwara before the closures.
- 51.2% of respondents reported a loss of a sense of community. 27.4% reported an increased feeling of loneliness and isolation. 23.8% felt unable to fully practice their religion, 21.4% felt they were unable to attend culturally specific classes and 32.1% of the respondents felt no impact.
- Feedback from a service user- *'I feel like I have lost something'*. Another respondent said- *'I am nearly 70 years old and I cannot remember a time in my lifetime where the Gurudwara was closed. Even during the war the Gurudwaras were open. Going to the Gurudwara is a big part of my religion. I hope they open up again soon.'*



- Reflecting on their experience respondents were also asked if there was anything that they would like to see more of in the Sikh community in Scotland. 67.6% said that they would like to see more hosting of informal discussions, 66.2% said that they would prefer talking therapies, and 58.8% said that they would like to see more opportunities to develop resiliency skills.
- **The theme of loss and the perception that there was an absence of a sense of responsibility in the way places of worship conducted themselves emerged from the survey respondents feedback.**
- 58.8% of the respondents said they would like to see the provision of support in centres of faith.
- 3.6 % respondents also felt that the local Gurudwaras could have supported the communities better.
- One respondent stated '*(The) Gurdwara could have done a bit more for (sic) Sikh community instead of completely closing doors. Gurdwara is a huge support line for the Sikh community and it should not have been completely closed.*'
- In terms of communication of closure and re-opening of the Gurudwara, results showed that nearly 60% of the respondents felt they were not well informed enough.

# GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The survey findings on how the Sikh community viewed the UK and the Scottish government's handling of the pandemic through the first lockdown shows that both the respective government's responses to COVID-19 were viewed differently.

## Summary of Data

- 53% of the survey respondents viewed the UK Government's response to the pandemic as being poor, where only 4.4% of the survey respondents thought the UK Government had performed very well.
- 82% of the survey respondents viewed the Scottish Government's pandemic response favourably, where only 3.3% viewed the government's performance as poor.
- 67.7% of the survey respondents also felt that the information disseminated by the Scottish Government during the first lockdown was more accessible compared to the UK Government's messages, with respondents feeling that they were better informed.
- **The respondents also reflected on the measures that could be put in place after lockdown to help communities feel safer and ease life returning to normal.** They were: 80.8% of respondents preferred that wearing of face masks continued, 69.2% preferred vaccines, 62.8% preferred increased social distancing measures and 53.8% preferred increased law enforcement around easing of social distancing measures.

# EASING OF LOCKDOWN- REFLECTIONS

After the first lockdown the second survey was conducted where a smaller sample of community members were asked on their views on easing lockdown, the UK government's 'eat out to help out' scheme, and the opening of the leisure centres and unessential shops.

## Summary of data

- 50% of respondents felt positively about the easing of lockdown between July and September 2020.
- In relation to seeing family, one respondent stated, *'it was good for all of our mental health to see each other'*.
- The remainder of respondents either felt no change in their mood or mental health due to the easing of restrictions or felt a mixture of nerves and excitement. One respondent in their late sixties said they were *'glad that we would be going back to some normality'* but that they were also *'worried about going on public transport'*. Another felt reassured that everyone had to wear a mask.
- 43% of the respondents made use of the national 'eat out to help out' scheme or utilized other recreational spaces such as cinemas or shopping centres.
- One respondent said *'we went out about four times - in some places it was fine I didn't feel worried as they had all the spacing etc. in place. Other places were not so strict, [with] people walking about without masks'*.
- 35% of respondents did not make use of greater freedoms and disagreed with the easing of lockdown.

One respondent said *'it was a bad idea by the government [to] put economy before lives. I felt that this was too rushed as the virus was still out there and there were not enough protection measures in place'*.

- 64% of respondents said their working arrangements did not change with the easing of the lockdown.
- One respondent actually started working full time during the period of lock down easing, stating *'I found the transition quite strange and lonely at times'*. Another, a student, said *'I felt lonely as there was no motivation or real conversations with lecturers to keep you going, everything was done by myself'*.
- **The responses on restrictions easing centered on self-diagnosed and reported anxiety. This was due to uncertainty around the spread of the virus, social isolation, and constantly evolving public health messaging around preventative measures public was required to take.** Interestingly people generally felt more comfortable following social restriction guidelines as opposed to enjoying newfound social freedoms.
- Respondents were split on how the Scottish Government handled the easing of lockdown over the summer of 2020. They were asked to rate how they felt about the rise in cases and its impact on their mental health. 35% of respondents had serious concerns regarding the rise in cases and nearly a quarter of the respondents considered the Scottish Government's response to the easing of lockdown either better or the same as the UK Government's response.
- 43% of the respondents generally felt well informed following the weekly communications from the Scottish Government

about the easing of lockdown.

One respondent acknowledged that the tiered system *'brought in more complexity'*.

Another stated that one thing they felt was missing was *'messages in simple ethnic community languages orally. This needs to be addressed'*.

- 36% of respondents reflected that communication *'could have been better'* and they were left feeling *'extremely confused by the easing of the lockdown. The direction from both governments was not clear'*.

# LOCAL LOCKDOWNS- REFLECTIONS

Continuing with the smaller sample size, survey 3 asked questions of the respondents on how they felt about the announcement of local lockdowns, 'rule of 6', rise in cases and the rule of 2 households meeting.

## **Summary of data**

- 35% of respondents did not experience any changes to their activities and/or were not negatively affected by the announcement of local lockdowns in September 2020.
- 43% of the respondents felt negatively about the local lockdowns in September 2020. One respondent described feelings of being *'angry and anxious as finally I had some freedom over the summer but then it was getting taken away again'*. Another respondent said *'it made me feel that the virus was still very prevalent in our society and people should not be relaxing....I still felt very anxious'*. Another respondent described the negative impact of the local lockdowns on Gurdwaras as they closed again as *'a major loss for faith practice'*.
- Reflections on the rule of 6, which was implemented by the Government, found there was a negative impact on the majority of the group because of large families prevalent in the Sikh community.
- On balance respondents did not feel too scared by the looming 'second wave' of coronavirus. Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about the rise in cases and the impact on their

mental health. 64% of the respondents did not experience any changes in their lifestyle and the rise in

cases did not impact on their mental wellbeing.

- 36% of respondents however did feel their mental health was affected as restrictions were imposed again. One respondent stated, *'my mental health was significantly better than the previous lockdown. However, I was still quite nervous with regards to getting out the house'*.
- In comparison another respondent stated that although they understood what was required of them they *'did not follow [the rules] as closely as the first time due to anger and frustration'*.

# CONCLUSION

With social restrictions easing and the economy opening up again people's differential experiences of the pandemic will inform how quickly and easily they are able to recover from the effects of the pandemic. Based on the evidence gathered through our engagement with the community to facilitate and support people that have been further disadvantaged, we call for action on the following:

- As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic factors such as rapid changes in the employment market and uncertainty in sectors such as hospitality and retail has made job acquisition and retention more challenging. **We recommend dedicated employability and training programmes for people that have lost their jobs during the pandemic.**
- As we move into greener economy, new skills are required and new opportunities are being created. The evidence clearly highlights that there is a stark gendered impact of the pandemic on employment, even within the Sikh community. Considering the changing employment landscape and based on broader trends, women that have lost jobs are likely to be occupationally segregated, underemployed and/or in low paid jobs, and were likely to have been working in the hospitality, retail, or care sectors. It becomes extremely challenging for this cohort to reskill and seek new employment opportunities in the green economy, overnight. **We recommend that COVID-19 recovery should therefore consider these aspects for women when formulating employability and training programmes and employ a fair gendered approach in job creation, training and upskilling opportunities.**
- **We recommend more investment is made in schools to support teachers in the delivery of remote learning and enhance delivery infrastructure as lack of structure and guidance from schools during**



### **the pandemic disadvantaged learners.**

- Community organisations such as Sikh Sanjog through their youth work are attuned to the learning and development needs of young learners within a community setting. There is an opportunity here for schools to partner with organisations such as Sikh Sanjog to co-develop and deliver learning.
- The pandemic exacerbated social isolation and loneliness for many within the BME community and this significantly impacted the mental wellbeing as self-reported by the respondents. Organisations such as Sikh Sanjog have picked up the gap in delivery of health and social care partnerships through mental and physical wellbeing community programmes and there is still a great demand for this service. **We recommend resources in the form of funding are provided as support to BME organisations to continue this service. Healing from the pandemic for the community and as a society through community wellbeing initiatives should be considered as an active outcome within funding programmes.**
- Places of worship as we know have significance within the collective of the community and the Sikh community is no different. The general sense was that the places of worship could have played a much bigger role within the community during the pandemic. **We recommend that through interfaith platforms places of worship are actively encouraged to collaborate with community organisations in the delivery of pandemic recovery programmes and support in spreading pandemic related public health messages.**

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