



COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation  
dynamics Research and Modelling



**Vulnerability and  
Crisis: The COVID-19  
pandemic responses  
from civil society  
organizations in South  
Wales**

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## Disclaimer

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This report gives a brief overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic was encountered and responded to from the perspective of civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizen group advocate groups in South Wales. Discussing the Swansea Metropolitan region, CSO and advocate group contributions to crisis management, and vulnerable groups, the report focuses on changes in these organisations responses, participatory practices that involved ‘everyday people’, and the local impacts of governmental responses. It also considers particular vulnerable groups, notable changes existing vulnerabilities, and actions taken to address these changes. These reflections are located in the Swansea Metropolitan region until September 2022, and offers lessons learnt and successful practices.

The report is based on online pandemic response publications, such as statement on organisations’ websites and expert interviews from a range of organisations. The experts interviewed include representatives of gender and cultural minority groups and local community engagement officers. The interviews were conducted over Zoom or Microsoft Teams, the audio recordings were transcribed, and analysed thematically in NVIVO 12. The interviewees have provided informed consent and quotations of their input have been anonymised. Ethical approval has been provided by the Swansea University College of Science Ethics Board.

The report is part of the larger COVINFORM Deliverables “D6.7 Analysis: Community and citizen responses and impact” and “D6.5 Baseline report: Community and citizen responses” and connected with COVINFORM Deliverables 4.7, 5.7, and 7.7. All available on <https://www.covinform.eu/>

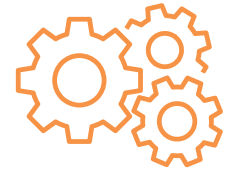
## The Swansea Metropolitan region



The Swansea Metropolitan region can be characterised as the second largest urban area in Wales. Strong bonds geographically in the smaller deprived areas in Swansea County, though communities had mostly formed around gender, ethnicity, age, faith, and family histories of deep poverty. It is an area that has many deprived areas; in particular the villages north and east of Swansea city centre are relatively poor (e.g. Morriston, Clydach, Pontardawe, Blaen-Y-Maes, Langyfelach), as are some urban neighbourhoods in Swansea (e.g. Sandfields, Sketty, Townhill). Swansea Council support for deprived communities (in accordance with the Welsh Government statistic) had initially been organised around the themes of employability, health, and education, but in 2018 it changed to mostly employability.

Prior to the pandemic, the Swansea Metropolitan Area was characterised by socio-economic inequalities that follow ethnicity and gender lines with informally organised support networks and poverty levels that had very little capacity for setbacks. In Pembrokeshire, Gypsy Roma Travellers (GRTs) are the largest ethnic minority, and they have been welcome there. However, in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot they experience more stigmatisation and racism. For refugees and asylum seekers, Swansea is found to have a particularly cohesive and collaborative network (Welsh Government 2023).

## Gendered and racialised crisis responses, citizen involvement, and impact



CSOs in Wales seemed to work with local and national governments where they had collaborative structures set up prior to the pandemic. For instance, a Stakeholder Engagement Officer at Public Health Wales explains that they liaised between the public health and environmental health teams of the Health Board, the Local Authority Staff, and underserved communities already and continued to do so after the start of the pandemic in Wales. A Community Engagement Officer employed by a local Council added that the CSOs already in their network regularly asked for community-based support that was often rapidly honoured. Therefore, local authorities seemed to be open to be told what CSO/community initiative to resource, especially during the early stages of the pandemic, and right until the behavioural measures were lifted in 2022.

Two Community Engagement Officers that were interviewed for this project were well-networked with different minority ethnic groups in the Swansea Metropolitan Area. They explained how responses from these communities in Wales took place in the form of dedicated programmes from existing organisations that had received funding from the framework offered by the Welsh government and local councils. For instance, the pre-existing and Wales-oriented organisation ‘Diverse Cymru’ created a BAME Mental Health Online/Telephone support project in December 2020 to support Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people across Wales who struggled with their mental health during the pandemic. Furthermore, at Council level, representatives of the BAME communities in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot launched a campaign to dispel fear and mistrust about the vaccination programme to encourage people to get vaccinated. This ‘Tell Me More Campaign’ signposts to correct information from local BAME medical practitioners, faith and community leaders.

CSOs that did not already work with national and local authorities before the pandemic responded by pointing out deficiencies in the pandemic policies. A women’s labour organisation wrote reports after collecting data on gender disparities in the effects of the pandemic measures and support structures. A research manager interviewee explained:

*“From an ordinary women's perspective, yes, unpaid labour has never been recognized. And in the pandemic, the inequalities exacerbated because of this problem. I just wanted to highlight it because as it comes, this was not reflected in the regulations of pandemic, so the policies are not prepared from a gender mainstreaming perspective, and this became a very big issue, because they prepared the policies from a very kind of a linear, very orthodox employment perspective. (...) But they never talked about these unpaid labour issues in those contexts (...) The policy was created gender blind, and it affected women's life very, very badly in the beginning of the pandemic.” (Interviewee CSO61)*

They argued that the Welsh government had a structure to govern labour that was already largely insensitive to a gendered labour market, which they identified to prohibit exacerbating gender inequalities during the pandemic. In addition to the differences on the labour market, the interviewee from the women’s labour organisation noted how women were also more vulnerable than men in the organisation of their everyday life:

*“The support network carries part of our society, whether it is recognized or not. So the problem is that the pandemic made us recognize it, but it's already there. (...) So we need to care, this is our very existence, but in that existence, we lost the support network. So we are isolated and lost the caring community (...) We lost a very essential thing that makes us a society, you know, the support network. And I think this affects women quite a lot.” (Interviewee CSO61)*

They continue with pointing out how their research demonstrates that the majority of domestic work and home-schooling fell disproportionately on women's shoulders during the spring 2020 lockdown and autumn/winter lockdown of 2021. As such, they organised several campaigns to get women's pandemic plights to the attention of businesses to improve flexible working. They already had guidelines about efficient flexible working and remote working, and they gave webinars on this and effective support provision for women employees, as well as directly to women.

CSOs also found each other when realising a shared problem for the vulnerable groups they work with and represent. During the early stages of the pandemic, a new partnership was set up between EYST, ProMo Cymru, Citizen's Advice Cymru, Women Connect First, and other stakeholders that is represented on its website as follows: The Multi-lingual Helpline Wales, which is a national helpline providing information, referral and signposting individuals to specialist advice, mainstream and community organisations. This participative action was mostly organised by and aimed at BAME groups who are vulnerable psychologically, linguistically, and/or do not have the capacity to find credible useful information about the pandemic themselves. It was funded by the *Welsh Government's Voluntary Sector Emergency Fund*.

According to Community Engagement Officer 1, the effects of the Councils' retrieval and claw-back of targeted subsidies to vulnerable communities (i.e. homeless people, refugees, and asylum seekers) in the Swansea Metropolitan Area undoes vital work to battle inequality. These groups were found to land back on the street after accommodation resources had been cut, and COVID-19-safe activities for refugees and asylum seekers were stopped. For GRTs this time period was characterised by the realisation on the sites that more people were dying from infection with the virus and, as a result, more people came forward to be vaccinated. As such, the Engagement Officer organised vaccine vans to be parked outside the campsites, so that if people decided to have the vaccine it was immediately available.

The representative from the Women's organisation argued that women who were more likely to have been keyworkers (e.g. cleaners in hospitals) had had a very difficult time in the sense that they had more demands placed on them, for instance, in terms of the intensity of jobs and childcare. Aside from facing worse mental illness, and disproportionately having taken care of home-schooling without their care network, it emerged that self-employed women could not benefit from the self-employment schemes in the same ways men could. With the appearance of the 'Cost of Living' crisis in the wider UK, in this period it became clearer that women were affected much worse than men, as they are much more likely to live in poverty, particularly if they're single parents.

In the Swansea Metropolitan Area 'everyday people' got involved in pandemic practices in several ways. According to Community Engagement Officer 2, many helped out locally by making and distributing food parcels, and recreating a care structure that attended to needs around food and medicine provision and in terms of improving mental health. Community Engagement Officer 1 added the following:

*“The most vulnerable families have been provided help by someone within the neighbourhood by that family, they were not relatives, but because they thought that's their responsibility to go out and help and support. And there are so many other examples, say, SCVS [Swansea Council for Voluntary Service] had, I think, more than 1000 volunteers, you know. People come in, and just volunteer.” (Interviewee CEO64)*

In addition, everyday people found each other in neighbourhood support groups that consisted of people who ‘represented’ their street and were the go-to person for practical issues such as picking up groceries for people who were shielding, picking up medication, dog walking, checking in with lonely people, and organising other things. These ‘Street Champions’ were not clinically vulnerable, but the group was likely to have included socio-economically vulnerable people. These groups very active on Facebook during the first lockdown rapidly disappeared over the summer 2020 when the first lockdown was over. Many were not re-started in the winter 2021 lockdown.

Where certain social groups underperformed in the vaccine uptake rates in the area, CSOs and community organisations collaborated with local authorities through community engagement officers. Participatory practices were organised to culminate in the deployment of a ‘vaccine van’ in 2021 and 2022 in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot municipalities. Stocked with AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines, the van was driven to sites where particular groups come together and/or operate. One such site is a church that serves people with Caribbean origin, another a mosque, and the route also included certain streets to invite sex workers to have a vaccine.



## Conditions for vulnerable groups within the governmental crisis management



The vulnerable groups that were worked with by the interviewees include women, minority ethnic groups, refugees and asylum seekers, Muslim faith groups, Gypsy Roma Travellers, and people with low socio-economic status in Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, as well as broader South Wales. These groups did not change as the CSOs had their communities they work with and advocated for.

Gypsy Roma Traveller communities in Wales were already seen as vulnerable before the pandemic; mostly because they wanted to limit government interference in their life, which made the relationship with authorities challenging. Before the pandemic some sort of balance had been established, however, during the pandemic the authorities interfered further which caused disruptions in the lives of these communities. In particular, their mobile lifestyles were disrupted, and their income stopped as many Gypsy Travellers rely on working on the land, scrap, collection, and selling objects, and doing horse sales. The TGP Cymru interviewee explained:

*“The women will go on benefits because they've got children, and they've got to make sure that they've got money coming in for the children. (...) The men would not claim benefits, they wouldn't go on to Universal Credit or anything or wouldn't claim benefits because they were getting their own money's coming in. And even though a lot of them would have to claim through businesses, certain people obviously still – they didn't take off the government what they didn't give to the government in a way. Yeah, a lot of the families did have to go on to Universal Credit that was never dreamed of having to do that in the past, because they had money coming in.” (Interviewee CSO63)*

Not claiming benefits in the complete absence of people's own income thus was a new reason for this group to become financially vulnerable. Via Facebook Messenger the TPG Cymru interviewee and their colleagues were asked to apply for Universal Credit on behalf of community members. Their status as vulnerable group prior to the pandemic was deepened further in another way. Gypsy and traveller communities have an average life expectancy of 20 years less than that of the settled communities. The interviewee from CSO 'TGP Cymru' stated that this is because medical attention is not often sought. In the first pandemic year, therefore, the charity Friends, Family and Travellers helped individual GRTs navigate the registration system of General Practitioners and receive medical support.



## Lessons learnt include the following:

- (1) Existing networks between local authorities and CSOs were very effective in setting up a variety of support activities for particular communities, so these need to be fostered by authorities in preparation of new societal disruptions.
- (2) Gender roles and existing socio-economic differences between men and women were prone to cause deeper inequalities for already disadvantaged groups.

## Successful practices include:

- (1) A new sense of community was shaped during the pandemic and people were more conscious of the local area and people living in close vicinity. Highlighting the benefits of these small community ties and supporting initiatives to improve them sustainably was seen as successful practice.
- (2) Direct lines between community support workers and vaccine equity managers in Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire allowed to rapidly report issues. This resulted in the testing and vaccination teams arriving quickly and delivering medical help to Gypsy Roma Travellers on their caravan sites on several occasions. This strategy of bringing vaccines to people also had a very good impact on social groups that had not taken up vaccination as much as other – white – groups, in particular people with Caribbean origin, some Muslims, and sex workers.

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# The COVINFORM project

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