



Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland: *Mental Health*



Context

Problems with mental health are pervasive in NI and research shows that women are often more vulnerable to suffering from poor mental health. The Northern Ireland Health Survey shows that around one in five adults showed indications of possible mental health problems and levels were higher among women (25%) compared with men (16%). In addition, levels in the most deprived areas were around one and a half times those in the least deprived areas (30% compared to 20%).

The British Psychological Society found that the Cost-of-Living Crisis is having an acute impact on the mental health of women. 61% of women said that they were more anxious about paying their bills compared to 47% of men. Recent research published by the Mental Health Foundation in NI found that women are more likely than men to be anxious about paying their bills (39% of women, compared to 29% of men). The research also emphasises that those behaviours that are '*protective of mental health*', for example, getting enough sleep and maintaining connection with family and friends have been compromised.

It has been acknowledged that NI faces very specific problems in respect of mental health, as a post-conflict society. Suicide rates tend to be higher in NI and there is a real concern that the Cost-of-Living Crisis could further push people in mental health crisis to end their lives. The Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhán O'Neill, explicitly links austerity, economic crisis and recession with suicidal pain. Professor O'Neill called for a package of measures to alleviate the mental toll of the Cost-of-Living Crisis, including an increase in social security rates, additional payments for people who are disabled and additional support for families to address the harmful impacts of child poverty.

You can read the full research paper "Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland" here: <https://bit.ly/44UPleX>

Findings

The Cost-of-Living Crisis has caused increasing levels of financial hardship and isolation resulting in worsening health impacts particularly in the area of mental health:

- 91% of the women felt that Cost-of-Living increases had impacted on their physical or mental health or both.
- Many of the women reported feeling high levels of stress and anxiety over meeting their bills and many felt unable to escape from worries about their financial situation which took a toll on them both physically and mentally.
- The women discussed a range of health related issues arising from the Cost-of-Living Crisis including increased sleeplessness, panic attacks, high blood pressure, worsening depression and poor diet because of eating cheaper food.
- Women placed great importance on the services/support provided by local Women's Centres/groups not only for material help but also with mental health/wellbeing. Many reported that they would be in a worse situation if they did not have access to their local Women's Centres/groups.

Recommendations

- Ensure that measures are put in place so that the already high numbers of people experiencing mental health problems in Northern Ireland do not increase as a result of the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis. The most crucial action to support good mental health will be financial support schemes that prevent people from experiencing poverty and financial stress.
- Cross-departmental priorities that recognise the need to tackle poverty in order to improve mental health, particularly for those experiencing the greatest inequalities. Decision makers must not only be aware of the mental health impact of the policies they are implementing, but they also must be able to mitigate the risks to people's mental health.
- Urgent need for sustainable funding models for organisations working to prevent long-term mental illness/loss of life, particularly funding that supports community social networks, especially for grassroots organisations.
- Ensure that frontline workers know how to respond effectively to the mental health effects of financial stress and strain.
- Need for investment in cost-effective support that supports evidence-based programmes to protect mental health.

Quotes from Participants

The Cost-of-Living Crisis has definitely made my mental health issues worse. You're literally worrying about all the bills, having to pay for heating, just everything. Then I'm not sleeping at night. My anxiety and depression would be bad anyway, it had got a bit better but now it's worse because everything is going up in price now.

*We're not living,
we're just
existing.*

*Mum guilt is real,
you feel so
guilty. The effect
it has on your
mental health.*

I'm losing sleep because I'm thinking I need this and this and this. I have a new baby and the expenses just keep going up. I'm on Maternity Leave, I've no income and the baby always needs something so I'm not sleeping over it. Not being able to provide what you actually feel you need and then feeling that you're letting yourself and your child down – the guilt that comes with that – not being able to provide for your children the things you think they need and deserve.

It has an impact on your physical health too. I was awake at 4 o'clock this morning, I've lost my hearing over the past while with stress. My GP said I needed to take time for myself because of stress but how can I do that with three kids on my own?

It feels like you're not doing enough like you're letting the kids down that's how it makes me feel. I'm borrowing money off my mum and dad. I'm 32 I shouldn't have to come to them like a wee girl saying I've no money. I just can't get my head above water no matter what I do.

It has increased my sleeplessness, stress, panic attacks, anxiety pains. My weight has increased as my food intake has changed as I can't afford to buy healthier food. It just feels like its constant stress piling on, my anxiety is through the roof, panic attacks, eating unhealthy food because it's cheaper.

It's just constantly all talk about the Cost-of-Living Crisis – it has impacts on your mental health too. No matter what conversations you're having it's all about the cost of things. You know your moneys coming in and it's all going straight out again.

I barely sleep due to not eating. I panic from week to week to see if I can pay my bills and afford food for my children.

Beforehand people were getting stressed at times but now we're living in a constant state of stress. I'm constantly watching my money and it's a constant state of stress. I'm not sleeping and grinding my teeth at night with the stress.

Money is a constant worry. I have to think twice before spending anything. It is affecting my sleep and I am constantly stressed out.

I'm pregnant at the minute so the worry has increased tenfold. I'm a single parent with 3 kids and one has a disability. I'm really struggling.

I'm now continuously worrying about money. I've no savings anymore. I don't have enough money to not constantly be worried. I don't sleep well and my anxiety is worse than ever.

Anxiety, sleeplessness, stress, panic attacks. Due to constantly having the thought in your head about the next meal and worrying if the gas or electric is going to run out.

It makes me worried I'm not going to be able to care for my kids due to the cost of living rises. I have depression and anxiety, my hair is falling out due to stress and my depression leaves me with no energy.

I worry about keeping my baby warm and fed. I can't provide treats for the baby, having to buy second hand clothing and items and having to do without some things. Worry, sleepless nights, stress is impacting on me. Along with the guilt over not being able to provide things for my baby.

My anxiety has increased and my anti-depressants have been increased. There is constant worry, I'm stressed all the time.

Stress and panic attacks have got a lot worse due to the worries of the cost of living. My physical health has got a lot worse too.

I have more anxiety, panic attacks and increases in the cost of living has affected my relationship with my husband. It has also affected my depression.

Because of the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis I just cannot afford to take part in social activities which is leaving me isolated, affecting my mental health more.