

# **YWCA study partnering with young women on the impact of Covid-19: Participatory Action Research (PAR) through a Kaupapa Māori and Pacific Research lens**

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** New Zealand's early response to Covid-19 ensured the successful elimination of the novel coronavirus, but came with an economic and social toll, particularly among Māori and Pacific communities. Within these communities, young people have experienced higher levels of distress and anxiety. This report gives a synopsis of the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) study on the experiences and impacts of Covid-19 as told by young Māori and Pacific women.

**Methods:** Based on collaborative and empowerment-based methods, the YWCA study followed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology guided by both Kaupapa Māori practices and Pacific Research protocols. In doing so, participants were partners in the research process. The methods of data collection adopted for this study entailed wānanga (forum to deliberate and discuss) and talanoa (narrative style interview). 14 young Māori and Pacific women aged between 18 and 30 years took part in a 2-day wānanga and shared stories and experiences of living through the pandemic.

**Results/Discussion:** The YWCA study in partnership with the participants identified three key themes of response, recovery, and resilience. These key themes led to understandings and determinants of well-being for young Māori and Pacific women in New Zealand.

**Conclusion:** The YWCA study yields findings that relate to experiences of young Māori and Pacific women during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020. Determinants of well-being and strategies in supporting young Māori and Pacific women were identified during the research process. The study is useful in applying a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach through the lens of Māori and Pacific worldviews.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; New Zealand; young women; Kaupapa Māori; Pacific Research; YWCA

## Introduction

New Zealand's early response to Covid-19 has included strict lockdown strategies that aimed to eliminate community transmission of the novel virus in 2020. The advent of Covid-19, and its economic and social effects, have disrupted almost every aspect of life worldwide. However, its impact does not fall equally on all members of society. Covid-19 presents greater health risks to Māori and Pacific peoples with a higher likelihood of hospitalisation and death (Plank et al., 2020). Māori and Pacific peoples also bare a higher burden and disproportionately higher rates of non-communicable diseases (Cammock, Tonumaipē'a, et al., 2021). The impact of Covid-19 has far-reaching social and economic consequences that are likely to disproportionately affect Māori and Pacific communities in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2022; Plank et al., 2020).

As of June 2022, Māori (22%) and Pacific peoples (26%) represented the the second and third highest number of cases to be hospitalised by ethnicity. Covid-19 health risk is further emphasised by the disparities in non-communicable diseases for Māori and Pacific peoples. That is, Māori and Pacific peoples have disproportionately higher levels of non-communicable diseases compared to non-Māori and non-Pacific ethnic groups. Young people aged between 10 and 29 years represent the highest proportion of Covid-19 cases of all cases nationwide in New Zealand. The next largest group of individuals were in the age range of 30 and 39 years. However, young people have the lowest rates of hospitalisation cases (Ministry of Health, 2022).

Beyond the statistics of cases among Māori and Pacific peoples, and for young people, the Covid-19 crisis poses considerable pressure and disruption concerning education, employment and income, and mental health. Young people worldwide are also more likely to be unemployed and have less disposable income compared to previous generations (OECD, 2020). A study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) identified mental health, employment, and disposable income as the greatest concerns for young people during the Covid-19 crisis. It has been reported that the general population of younger adults (aged 18-24 years) in New Zealand were experiencing considerably higher levels of psychosocial distress during Covid-19 compared to the general public (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). Increased levels of psychosocial distress during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 are said to cause increased anxiety, and lower well-being (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). Following the outbreak of the swine flu in 2009, there were global concerns of an influenza pandemic that would cause acute mental health issues as well as its aftermath (Douglas et al., 2009). Further, it is well understood that natural and human emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic can result in adverse conditions for individuals, especially young people (OECD, 2020).

For young people, there are critical transition points where individuals change status and roles depending on the influences of a person's ecological structure and broader sociohistorical contexts (Elder & Giele,

2009). Although the United Nations defines youth as persons being between the ages of 15 and 24 years, many communities consider the transition to adulthood to be beyond the age of 24 years (Conn et al., 2016; Tuagalu, 2011). It has been reported, that adolescent well-being has been deteriorating worldwide (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021). Prior to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, young people were already experiencing high rates of mental distress, depression, and suicide (Crengle et al., 2013). Studies have called for solutions that ask young people to be engaged in various endeavours that seek to identify and improve well-being for young people (Kleszczewska et al., 2022).

This YWCA study aimed to explore the experiences of young Māori and Pacific women and the impacts of Covid-19. The study explored ways in which YWCA may support the participant community through philanthropic means. Key areas of discussion were based on life before, during, and after the initial New Zealand 2020 lockdowns due to increased cases of Covid-19. In addressing the overarching focus, preliminary research questions included the following:

- How do young Māori and Pacific women feel during a time of increasing uncertainty?
- How have they navigated through a crucial transitional point into adulthood?
- How can the YWCA best support young Māori and Pacific women through a Covid-19 era?

The data from the YWCA study captured the experiences and stories of young Māori and Pacific women who had lived through two lockdowns in Auckland, New Zealand. The data collection phase took place between November and December 2020. By this time, there had been two significant lockdowns under New Zealand's government-led Elimination Strategy, that is, at alert level 4 in March 2020 and level 3 in August 2020.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Multiple perspectives were drawn from 14 young women who self-identified as of Māori and/or Pacific descent, and were aged between 18 and 28 years. 7 participants identified as being Māori, and 7 identified as being of Pacific descent. Four of these participants were of both Māori and Pacific descent. Participants identified as being of Māori, Samoan, Tongan, and Cook Islands descent. Participants resided in Southern and Western parts of Auckland in New Zealand. These areas were deemed appropriate for locating the study given the high proportion of Māori and Pacific populations that reside in these locations (RIMU, 2020). Recruitment of participants was made based on snowballing and purposive sampling. Although not intentional in participant selection,

most participants identified as being religious and belonging to a christian denomination.

### *Participatory Action Research through a Kaupapa Māori and Pacific lens*

The study followed a Participatory Action Research methodology through a Kaupapa Māori and Pacific lens. The PAR methodology generally consists of four phases of action research that entail planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2004). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is known for its ability to bring researchers and community together to identify, investigate, and analyse problems, and to produce solutions together (Kemmis et al., 2014). PAR is considered a form of self-reflective inquiry that both researchers and participants can undertake collectively with the goal of improving and addressing inequities in public health (Baum et al., 2006). PAR is carried out on the premise that participant communities should be full partners in the research process. Both Pacific and Māori researchers have found PAR as complementary to culturally-responsive research methods and methodologies (Cammock, Conn, et al., 2021; Conn et al., 2016; Eruera, 2010). In this study, the facilitator, and primary researcher were of Māori and Pacific descent, and were supported by a non-Māori, non-Pacific psychologist. Through PAR, the research methods were discussed and chosen by the participants.

One of the key dimensions of indigenous research is the explicit intention to connect with and serve the interests of the participant community, and in turn, to share the research knowledge with those who helped create it as an appreciation for their tino rangatiratanga or self-determination (Smith, 2012). The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. The study followed Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodology guided by both Māori and Pacific research practices. The Kaupapa Māori and Pacific practices of the research harnessed the knowledge constructs, practices, and processes stemming from Māori and Pacific worldviews (see table 1). Kaupapa Māori practices and Pacific research protocols can provide a guide for researchers in cultural terms which reflect some of the values that inform behaviour throughout the research process (Smith, 2012; Vaioleti, 2006). Although cultural traditions may differ between Māori and Pacific peoples, across tribal and village territories in the Pacific and in New Zealand, and among the Pacific Islands, there are some cultural alignments that shape Pacific and Māori identity, society, and worldviews.

Kaupapa Māori and Pacific research involves both the reinstatement of traditional knowledge as well as reinforcement of contemporary beliefs and ethics. Taken together, these embody the contemporary drive for self-determination and empowerment for and by Māori and Pacific peoples (Henry & Pene, 2001; Tualaulelei & McFall-McCaffery, 2019; Pulu-Endemann, 2001). The centrality of genealogy, connection to all things spiritual, human, and environmental illustrates how Kaupapa Māori and Pacific Research informs ontology, or assumptions of 'what is real'; and epistemology, around what constitutes knowledge. Whakapapa

underpins the entire social system in Māori society. It articulates the connections between the animate (humans) and inanimate (the physical environment), and from the atua (gods) to the present time (Barlow, 1991, p. 173). Whanaungatanga is the expression of those relationships, the kinship and sense of belonging that connects members of the group, thereby enshrining mutual rights and reciprocity (Moorefield, 2011). Through both our whakapapa and whanaungatanga there is a collective interdependence between humans, the environment, and the god's, which encapsulates mind, body, and spirit (Henry & Pene, 2001). The interconnectedness between humanity and all things earthly and spiritual is centred on a reciprocal relationship with creation and comes from a Pacific ancestry (Spiller et al., 2015, p. 74). Research and researchers are obliged to enhance these qualities of connection, spiritual and physical, for the communities in which they serve. These are the very markers of trustworthiness in some research for indigenous peoples, ensuring respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

The ontological and epistemological juncture of Māori and Pacific worldviews is centered on the deep understanding that all things, i.e., spiritual, environmental, and human are interconnected (Pulotu-Endemann et al., 2007; Spiller et al., 2015; Tamasese et al., 2005). That said, the Māori and Pacific research practices as set out by Smith (2012) and Violeti (2006) provided a touchstone for the processes that were adopted in this study.

**Table 1. Kaupapa Māori Practices and Pacific Research Protocols**

<b>Kaupapa Māori Practices</b> (Smith, 2012, p. 124)	<b>Pacific Research Protocols</b> (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 29-31)
Aroha ki te tangata (show respect for participants)	Faka'apa'apa (respectful, humble, considerate)
Kanohi kitea (be the seen face, present yourself to participants, face-to-face)	Anga Lelei (tolerant, generous, kind, helpful, calm, dignified)
Titiro, whakarongo...korero (look, listen...speak with care)	Mateuteu (well prepared, hardworking, culturally versed, professional, responsive)
Manāki ki te tangata (share and host people, be generous)	Poto He Anga (knowing what to do and doing it well, cultured)
Manāki ki te tangata (share and host people, be generous)	'Ofa Fe'unga (showing appropriate compassion empathy, aroha, love for the context)
Kia tupato (be cautious)	
Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the mana of people)	
Kia mahaki (do not flaunt your knowledge)	

*\*In the Māori and Tongan language respectively*

### *Wānanga and Talanoa*

The methods and tools adopted in the study involved individual talanoa (a Pacific method likened to indepth narrative interviews) and wānanga (used as both a Kaupapa Māori method likened to focus group interviews, and a forum to deliberate or discuss). Wānanga and talanoa both share commonalities in practice as they are traditional forms of knowledge transmission whether it be in informal or formal settings where peoples within their respective communities can share their thoughts, feelings, and stories (Vaioleti, 2006; Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). These methods were used throughout the research process including research design, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The process of bringing the research team together (participants and researchers) involved a series of talanoa (discussions).

This was done initially with four youth participants where a discussion of the research area and methodology commenced. The young women planned a 2-day wānanga. Over the 2-days a schedule was designed to

cover key areas including: whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building), identifying issues and refining research questions, collaborative thematic analysis, and dissemination. Each of the young women then invited their peers to attend. 1 of the 4 initial participants agreed to facilitate discussions throughout the course of the wānanga. The goal was to create a culturally-safe space where participants could be free to be themselves (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2015). During early stages of the 2-day wānanga, a session on participatory action research through the lens of Māori and Pacific worldviews was carried out by the primary researcher. Following this session, the young women followed the activities, and remaining talanoa sessions were conducted as planned by the initial 4 young women. These were carried out predominantly by the participant facilitator. By voluntary invitation, participants were asked to open and close each wānanga with a karakia or prayer.

Through PAR guided by Kaupapa Māori and Pacific research practices, the study was predominantly led by, for, and with Māori and Pasifika young women. In doing so, the benefits of the study were firstly for the participant community, young Māori and Pasifika women; and secondly, to guide YWCA in providing philanthropic support for the participant community. Participants planned and took part in games, group discussions, one on one talanoa, and visual research methods. As part of the visual research methods, participants created paintings that would represent and depict personal feelings, and experiences of Covid-19. The young women shared their paintings with the group and had talanoa to discuss their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The use of visual research methods can be integral to the process of research, while also documenting the process, and providing a forum for data analysis (Given, 2012).

#### *Data Collection*

With signed consent, key talanoa and wānanga sessions were either video or voice recorded. Group discussion or talanoa were no longer than one hour, after which there would be a short break, and the following talanoa session would commence. A defining feature of the data collection phase was whakawhanaungatanga or cultivating of relationships. Strategies during the 2-day wānanga were adopted to include ice breakers, games, and visual activities like painting to allow for the young women to feel comfortable, and discuss in depth their experiences.

The young women were given koha (gifts) as a token of appreciation for their time and the sharing of knowledge and experiences at the close of the wānanga. The recordings of talanoa sessions were transcribed. A video was also produced compiling the stories shared by the participants. A final report was curated based on these themes chosen by the participants and backed up by quotes in the transcriptions.

#### *Data Analysis*

One of the features of PAR research is the interweaving of research and development where analysing information “moves into the world of

action” (Cammock et al., 2021). Thus, data analysis took place in partnership with participants and formed a collaborative thematic analysis and evaluation talanoa at the close of the 2-day wānanga. Further, participants reflected, and discussed in depth some of the key themes that had emerged from the 2-day wānanga and further highlighted the points they felt were important to share with YWCA. Having participants take part in the analysis process ensured data was validated, rigorous, and trustworthy. There were tears, laughter, and sombre moments particularly in this analysis session. Centred on reciprocity and manaakitanga, participants, researchers, and facilitators had built strong relationships throughout the research process that would continue beyond the study.

## Results & Discussion

The key areas for discussion were based around life experiences before, during, and after the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020. Participants identified three key themes relating to their experiences with the impacts of Covid-19. These were: 1) response, relating to institutional measures in combatting the social and economic impacts 2) recovery, navigating back to ‘normal life’ and 3) resilience, based on strategies and solutions proposed for the future.

**Table 2. Synopsis of Theme development from Wānanga and Talanoa**

	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Details</b>
Response	Lockdown	Time for reflections, family time, exercise, cooking. Safe place at home.
	Discrimination & Racism	Pacific participants felt discriminated against through media channels and their reporting of Pasifika and ‘South Auckland’ cases. <i>“we (Pacific peoples) listened when they said get tested...we were careful.”</i>
	Economic Impacts	Added financial pressure - redundancy, decreased work hours, pay cuts, and increased workload to make up for immune compromised family members.  Overcrowded housing made these financial pressures more difficult and added stress and anxiety.  The wage subsidy seemed to favour those who had come out of work because of Covid-19 over people who were students and unemployed prior to Covid-19.

		Unequal treatment of tenants - mortgage holidays did not filter down to those who were renting.
	School	As learning spaces moved online, lack of devices and connectivity was a major disadvantage for students.  Disruption to schooling - grades had decreased considerably.  Uncertainty - schooling which included practical learning came to a halt.
Recovery	Elderly	The well-being of elderly members in the family was the responsibility of extended family, and several young women.  Misinformation impacted elderly and their perceptions on the virus.
	Mental Health & Spiritual well-being	Faith and religion as well as the family unit provided support for mental and spiritual well-being through a time of increased anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.
	Community	Participants of Māori descent spoke of the supports from iwi and local marae that helped the elderly members of the family.
	Whānau-led response – increased responsibilities	Remittance payments to families back in the islands discontinued as some young women struggled to cover cost of living in New Zealand.  Notions of fa'alavelave (to share the burden) were support systems that both helped and added extra responsibilities for some of the young women.
Resilience	Determinants of well-being	When the social, health, and economic impacts from Covid-19 were experienced by either family, extended family, or community, its effects tended to fall on the shoulders of the participants.  The determinants of well-being in young Māori and Pasifika women are interconnected and interwoven with reciprocity, love, and care. Despite the added stress and responsibility that had an onflow affects on the participants, these networks (family, extended family, and community) have also been a source of support and comfort (see figure 1).

While it can be assumed that the determinants of well-being and the stressors that young people experience are similar worldwide

(Kleszczewska et al., 2022), the young women of this study identified areas that significantly influenced their well-being particularly during major disruptions brought on by the impacts of Covid-19. Mental distress is known to be heightened during times of natural and human emergencies (Douglas et al., 2009). This study provides insight into the ways in which young Māori and Pasifika women perceive, experience, and navigate through distress during a global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The determinants of well-being in young Māori and Pasifika women were developed as a result of this study (see figure 1). When the social, health, and economic impacts from Covid-19 and its associated government-led health measures were experienced by the young women in this study, the burden on family, extended family, and/or community was also felt by the young women. For example, when the breadwinner in the family was unable to work due to auto-immune disease, it fell on the young women in the household to provide for the family, which further resulted in less time to focus on tertiary studies and increased working hours.

**Figure 1. Determinants of well-being for Māori and Pasifika Young Women (YWCA, 2021)**

## Determinants of well-being

for Young Māori & Pasifika Women



YW  
CA

Based on the determinants of well-being, the young women discussed desired strategies and solutions to the issues highlighted during the wānanga. Recommendations discussed and made to YWCA included support relating to increased access to devices, the creation of a culturally-responsive mental health app, increased support for school leavers entering university and for the elderly, increased support for women's refuges, rental payment holidays, and strategies to prevent paranoia or panic buying.

## **Conclusion**

A key feature of the PAR interwoven in both Kaupapa Māori practices and Pacific protocols was the co-creation of a safe space which would be mana-enhancing (empowerment-oriented) for all involved. The young women of this study were involved in all stages of the research process including planning, data collection, and collaborative thematic analysis. Participants could both facilitate and share their experiences through visual means, and oratory. Through reciprocity, researchers are left with an enhanced feeling of duty and responsibility in sharing the taonga (treasures) that are the stories of the participant community and creating solutions to address the inequities within these communities. Although there were many challenges that filtered through the community, extended family, and immediate family, participants also found support and meaning from these networks which added to their ability to build mental resilience in the face of adversity. One way forward in creating and implementing the findings of the YWCA report would be to continue the partnership with the young women to design and co-create future support services and strategies. From the insights and experiences of the young Māori and Pasifika women of this study, mental health professionals, communities, businesses, organisations can create an infrastructure that mitigates the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on the well-being of young Māori and Pasifika women.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations as per the requirements of YWCA were discussed in depth with community leaders and academics to ensure this study was conducted ethically and responsibly.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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