



Loaded Silence: Women's Stories of Lockdown

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This is what you should know straight up about Victorian Women: we're not in lockdown, we're locked up. As I write this is for 22 hours per day with fines for non-compliance that vary from \$1,700 to \$5,000. You probably haven't heard much about this if you are in another state. To be honest, no one is saying much about it here, either. In news reporting on the protests from the Victorian fringe, businesswomen haven't made the cut. But our silence does not equal compliance.

Q: *How did the Andrews Government, masters of inclusion, get this all so wrong?*

A: *They haven't been paying attention.*

Victorian women have shouldered the burden of the state government's ongoing lockup and are yet to receive even a cursory nod of thanks. In response, we are doling out an epic, wordless,



soundless rebuke that should have this state's politicians and policy makers quaking in their boots.

Why? Because Victoria's government and bureaucrats have, within the space of only six months, wiped out generations of gains for women in the name of the 'greater good'. It's a dangerous game being played with the greater share of the Victorian voting public.

In COVID-19, women are supposed to give up, shut up and manage up as the foundations of our independence are blown up. We're gaslighted when we speak up: *What price your equality measured in human life? What fresh hellfire would you rain upon us all?* But we're not buying this psychological manipulation, we are not questioning our own reality, and there is no doubt in our minds about what's really going.

Nothing screams 'massive disconnect' more loudly than the Victorian government's slogan: "Staying Apart Keeps Us Together". What keeps Victorian women together is a complex interplay of relationships and resources that enables us to curate a happy life for ourselves and those we love. Under the Victorian lockdown measures, those relationships and resources have been removed. We are beginning to see we are not all in this together. We are all in this alone.

The slogan is lazy and stupid. For the Government to push propaganda in the name of a desired behaviour change and to celebrate its effectiveness even though change has not been achieved – indeed to double down on the messaging – is galling enough. But the fact that the slogan is wrapped around every extra restriction on our freedoms is a logic fail of horrendous proportion. And logic fails like that get the attention of women. Those logic fails prompt questions. Questions like: "Do these people even know what they're *saying?*" "Do these people even know what they're *doing?*" Victorian businesswomen suspect the answers are "no".

He's not listening, so we're saying nothing.

This government ineptitude is our emergency. Victorian women have endured six months of ever-tightening restrictions on our access to capital, childcare, education, work, free movement, recreation, family and friends because of the 22/7 Lockup Debacle. We're labouring under a government that feels like a really very bad boyfriend. Threaten the wellbeing of the people you love? Keep close surveillance and ramp up domestic duty? Accuse, bully and diminish? Check, check, and check. All this cocktail of coercion lacks is a drop of Rohypnol to keep us all asleep.

So what are Victorian businesswomen doing while our masters bombard us with bankrupt slogans? We're freezing them out with the superpower of silence. While the Premier's not listening, we're saying nothing. At least not until the strategy is in place, an exit is set, the children are warm in bed and the f***-off stash of cash is ready. Until then square the shoulders, lift the chin, and proclaim a slogan that actually makes sense: a woman's place is in the resistance. And the rebellion is well and truly on among the businesswomen of this great state. A new Eureka is on the boil.



Southbank mural.
Photo: Bernard Spragg

Victorian businesswomen are fierce in the protection of their places and people. A quick survey at 4am will find many of us awake, running numbers, juggling priorities, looking for the economies and opportunities. Regardless of political persuasion, we share a passion for enterprise that matches all contenders. We would make a great business partner—for the right kind of Premier.

This week, I asked my network for their tales of the Victorian lockup. The defiance, humour, optimism, intelligence and grace of my cohort is intact and inspiring. Here are some conversations.

I asked: “Friends in Victorian Lockdown [Lockup] I am writing an essay on the impact of COVID-19 on our personal and professional and business lives. I am especially interested in your views of the impacts, particularly felt by women. Message me your response. I’ll ensure your privacy.”

A woman who experienced negative social surveillance and sanction: **Our family was the first at our school under the online homeschooling experiment. Teachers were really good, and did a fantastic job. But I still can’t put behind me the reaction of other people. I didn’t break any rules, but people created their own interpretation of the rules and how life should be lived in these unprecedented circumstances, then made judgements about me and others. I questioned whether we have a community here or something else. I feel very disappointed about people and those I thought were friends. Lockdown 1 was very harsh on me. My husband was the one person who was truly next to me.**

A single woman: *I’m lucky because my work is an Essential Service, so I’m able to come into the office every day. I’ve had to navigate a relationship breakdown, moving house, and adjusting to a different kind of life (almost a false life). I think I’m fairly lucky.*

A woman who moved away from Metro-Melbourne: *I was affected by the isolation side of it. We moved to a country town where the majority of the population is white. I felt completely out of my comfort zone, even when I went to the supermarket. I had the sensation of people judging me as an outsider with a high risk of being COVID-19 contagious.*

A self-effacing woman: *Tell them you know one lunatic who split from her husband, finished building her house, started a new business, and ‘homeschooled’ (lol) her children during the lockdown. She’s still alive (just).*

I then asked her: **Could it be** that you are not a ‘lunatic’ but a ‘warrior’? As in women are like tea bags; you only understand how strong they are when you put them in hot water?”

She replied: *LOL. I’m actually quite proud of myself. I’ve had some pretty tough days.*

A woman experiencing family loss: My beloved cousin has been gone now for many months. We grieve him every day, but we can’t even drive past his resting place. All I can do is blow kisses to the wind and turn the video stream off when the tears spring during online meetings. There is no sense we have adequately celebrated this wonderful man. It’s grief and guilt. Unfinished business. A failure.

A woman who returned from overseas before hotel quarantine was enforced: **I consider myself quite sociable and I love helping people. However, this Covid epidemic and reaction of society/friends to it made me re-analyse everything. Criticism, gossiping, spying, labelling etc.... The list will go on.... I felt emotionally damaged after my kids were kicked out of school because we spent a week in New Zealand in March.**

A woman who emigrated to Australia: *Home schooling is my biggest challenge. I am trying to teach in my second language to my little daughter whose English is better than mine. With this lockdown I experienced the meaning of depression for the first time, but I’m grateful I have a safe place to live.*

I then asked: “Would you know how to access mental health support via government services during lockdown?”

She answered: *It didn’t cross my mind to seek help, apart from immediate family. I actually didn’t know I was showing signs of depression until I had a big meltdown... If you have never experienced a situation like this, you wouldn’t recognise it.*

A woman who part-owns a gym: **I can’t believe the testimony given during the Quarantine Enquiry. I just. Can. Not. All those people with all that failed responsibility and they accuse me—via press conference—of being a heartless risk to human life for wanting to reopen my business, keep my work family gainfully employed, and my members fit in mind and body. The hypocrisy is stunning. ”**

A woman who is a business director and board member: *I love iso—though my heart is with others doing it tough. For me, this has been an opportunity to explore a deeply creative space where the usual strictures of work society simply do not apply. I’ve launched myself into the best space of my business career.*



I then asked: “Why does your heart go out to other women doing it tough?”

She replied: *Are you serious? If you're not feeling for Victorian women, you literally have no empathy.*

I replied: “*sigh*. Yes. It is quite literally a devastating indictment on the efficacy of the long touted and often lauded Victorian approach to ‘inclusivity’. The only thing Victorian women have been included in is the wholesale (and, dare I say, wanton,) tanking of respect for our contribution *on the part of the very people who promised us the opposite.*”

We want leadership that is ready to lead.

Isolation is great for innovation and Victorian businesswomen are all over it. We are not waiting on permission. We have already adapted. We have already evolved. We have already created alternate narratives, strategies and plans. We're beating this virus back. And although the personal is political, the ruling of ineptitude on the Victorian response to COVID-19 is not. It's not that we're angry. It's worse. We're disappointed. And we're looking for leadership that is ready to lead. Until that emerges, yes, we may have gone quiet.

That's because we're not talking to you.