

## **Transcript: The Forgotten Pandemic**

**Sean** (Host)

Hello and welcome to “The Forgotten Pandemic”. I’m Sean and I’ll be your host. Alongside me are Lauren, James, Harriet and Ben, all with vital yet unique perspectives on the Great Influenza Epidemic. If I were to ask a GCSE student what the most significant global event of their life has been, a large proportion would say COVID-19, yet little material about the mislabelled Spanish Flu exists at their level of education. Infecting around 500 million people worldwide, this influenza crisis caused 250,000 deaths in the United Kingdom, that’s around 20% more than COVID-19 did. Outside Britain, the devastation worldwide is demonstrated blatantly by the mortality count being higher than World War One. Over the duration of this podcast, Britain’s experience with this pandemic will be uncovered, particularly observed through the often overlooked experiences of women, both struggling with influenza or working to heal the sick. Without further ado, I’ll pass over to James, detailing the experiences of careworkers within this period.

**James**

Thank you Sean. In order to highlight the social and economical effects of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 on women, I have chosen to focus on an article by James Fenske, Bishnupriya Gupta, and Song Yuan titled “Demographic Shocks and Women’s Labor Market Participation: Evidence from the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in India”, which was published in *The Journal of Economic History* in 2022.

**Sean** (Host)

And is there any particular reason that you’ve chosen this article?

**James**

Good question. I chose this article to attempt to paint a global picture of the effect of the influenza pandemic on women. The focus of the article is on India, and I believe that this allows a global perspective while providing some relevance to Britain due to its place within the Empire. This article also provides in-depth analysis and statistics that are extremely valuable to our topic today. The data used by Fenske, Gupta, and Yuan to track Female Labour Force Participation was collected from colonial censuses, with a primary focus on the 1921 census data due to its proximity to the epidemic and a change in the methods of data collection later on.

The pandemic lasted from 1918-1919, and it first appeared in Bombay, before spreading North and West, with regions with less rainfall being affected the worst. The total loss of life is estimated at 12-20 million people dead, with the worst affected areas experiencing mortality rates of 15%. The article states that ‘The pandemic led to a shortage of labor and created a situation where women could potentially participate in the labor force and substitute for men in activities previously performed by men’. This was due to women entering the job market to make up for the deaths of male relatives and the need to earn more money, and this can be proven where it is seen that the areas with greater shares of

widows saw increased Female Labour Force Participation. This shows that the pandemic had a large effect on women in India's lives, as they were given more opportunities to work due to the necessity created by Influenza. This trend was not sustained however, as they found that Female Labour Force Participation only increased in services, and only in the 1921 census.

Fenske, Gupta, and Yuan state that 'there is a positive correlation between influenza mortality and the change in overall Female Labour Force Participation from 1911 to 1921.' This can be seen to have been caused by the epidemic with an increase of 2.8 percentage points in Female Labour Force Participation in 1921 as well as a statistically significant increase in Female Labour Force Participation, and I quote, "in more influenza-affected districts in 1921, followed by a decline in 1931'

They go on to conclude that the increase in Female Labour Force Participation is temporary, with 'a short-lived increase, concentrated in services, which is reversed within a decade'. Influenza increased the number of widows, as well as mortality raising the wages, which led to Female Labour Force Participation.

**Sean (Host)**

Thank you James for highlighting the economics that accompanied influenza and the shifting role of women within society as a result of that. However, it wasn't just economics where women gained more autonomy, was it Ben?

**Ben**

That's right, the growing equality for women can be seen through how their involvement in dealing with the flu was a major factor in changing attitudes towards their right to vote. For example, the Liberal Prime Minister H.H. Asquith previously denied the female right to vote, however he changed his mind after the war and began endorsing it. Even if there were political reasons for him to claim this, it's likely that it reflects changing attitudes towards women as a result of World War One and the Spanish Flu epidemic. In this sense nursing was one of the ways in which women actually fought for their freedom, and in the broader perspective of World War One, it shows that the home front was dangerous in tangible ways giving us a new perspective on social history in Britain at the time.

Looking at the roles of charitable organisations like the Red Cross provides an alternative perspective to the development of medicine, which the GCSE curriculum seems to focus on key figures such as Louis Pasteur or Robert Koch, who were almost always male. So, there were tens of thousands of Red Cross volunteers who dealt with the flu as part of Voluntary Aid Detachments. They were extremely at risk of becoming ill themselves. A testimony of one describes around one third of the hospital staff contracting the plague. In addition to this, many of them volunteered to go over to the front lines to deal with influenza outbreaks among soldiers for no money at all. So, conditions were incredibly harsh, they were very likely of contracting the flu and dying from it, but there was still an enormous involvement in this.

## Harriet

My research, like Ben, included information on the Red Cross too. I focused on individual women who played key roles within the organisation, such as Miss Emma Long and Joyce Sapwell – both nurses back home who had dealt first hand with the Influenza. Joyce Sapwell was a Red Cross VAD, a voluntary aided detachment nurse, during World War One. She wrote about her experience working in a hospital in Aldershot, Hampshire, as the Spanish flu took hold in England in 1918. I found a few quotes on these individuals that I think would be useful for the students, which we will link in the sources below.

## Lauren

As Ben and Harriet have already mentioned, Red Cross nurses certainly played vital roles in the battle against influenza, and there are various surviving examples of diaries written by these women, which help give insight into their crucial, yet often overlooked, roles. An example that I think really highlights this is the diary of Dorothea Crewdson, who was a British Red Cross nurse working in a military hospital on the front lines in France. In her diary,, which was published in the 2013 book ‘Dorothea’s War: A First World War Nurse Tells Her Story’, she details her thoughts, everyday life and experiences with patients. She also makes references to how overrun hospitals were towards the end of the war, with both military casualties and influenza cases. For instance, on the 27th of October, 1918 she writes: “my ward is now an influenza department and I have thirteen ‘fluers’ filling the atmosphere with germs. I am wondering if I can escape by any means myself. I felt sure the complaint was attacking me this afternoon, but now I feel better again and there is still hope.” Despite being in the midst of war and disease, Crewdson’s diary carries this optimistic tone throughout, showing her resilience and hard-working nature.

This is why I believe her diary holds huge significance and importance, as it details the personal experiences of an ordinary individual living through a major historical event — something which students will surely find interesting and engaging, particularly after having recently lived through a pandemic themselves. I also feel like history often focuses on observing individuals within a historical context or event — seeing them as merely ‘characters’ in a wider story. What makes diaries such as Crewdson’s so valuable is that they subvert this. Crewdson doesn’t just detail her experiences of the war and pandemic, but also her long walks on much needed days off, everyday interactions with patients and even hospital gossip. Therefore we are challenged instead to observe a historical event within the context of a whole, multi-faceted individual’s life.

Also, adding onto what James has just said, I think it’s worth mentioning how Britain’s experience of the pandemic was not universal. For example, while countries like the US and the UK generally had higher male mortality rates, the exact opposite was true for countries such as India, where more women were likely to die from influenza due to being more malnourished than men, and being primarily responsible for caring for the sick. So, while the GCSE curriculum focuses on British medicine, it would definitely be useful to mention to students that the impact of the Spanish flu in Britain cannot be generalised to the rest of the world, and that people, particularly women, of different nationalities had very different experiences of the pandemic.

## **Harriet**

Some more of my research into individual women in the pandemic uncovered two vital women who helped treat Influenza – Dr. Flora Murray and Dr. Louisa Garrett Anderson. These women were prominent people in the Endell Street Military Hospital in London, which was a woman-run hospital that had 14 doctors alongside numerous nurses and orderlies, all of whom were women. This is very impressive, and important to note as it was the first and only hospital run entirely by women within the British army.

Dr. Flora Murray insisted on women being meticulous about hygiene. A disinfecting hut was set up so staff were sent there to breathe in steamy vapour twice a day, as a disinfectant measure and to provide symptomatic relief. She also insisted those with flu were segregated on special wards, and screens were put around their beds to prevent the spread of infection, as well as staff to wear face masks all the time. These measures were later made standard practice by the War Office.

Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson was a chief surgeon in the hospital, whose mother was the first woman to qualify medical register in the UK. Garrett Anderson has been described as a very skilled and delicate surgeon.

It's important to remember these women as they are commonly forgotten throughout history, even though their work was so life changing and saved hundreds of lives.

## **Sean (Host)**

So this podcast has shown that the lives of women were profoundly affected by the Great Influenza pandemic, and that they played an instrumental role in treatment, often doing twice the work of their male contemporaries for half the recognition. James's focus on economics and Ben's on politics is a clear indicator of how fundamental women were in combating this disease. Harriet and Lauren focus on individuals as a reminder that this tragedy did occur, and to remember the sacrifices of the careworkers, many of whom were women. Thank you, and hopefully this pandemic is no longer being forgotten.

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