



together we grow

The Growing Club CIC
Feedback Evaluation Report

Anamaria Tigan

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Introduction

In 2018 we conducted a study to investigate the impact that The Growing Club CIC had on women entrepreneurship. We inquired about participants' wellbeing, confidence, financial situations, networking opportunities, and whether the growing club had any impact upon such areas on a professional or personal level in their life. We also asked whether they gained any practical skills and whether we have equipped them with skills enabling them to handle upcoming challenges in a different manner. We found there was an array of benefits our programmes brought in women's lives.

In the previous study conducted in 2018, 48 participants (aged 25-70), identifying as females, told us that business growth and sustainability occurred because they:

- found a sense of community where they can relate to and collaborate with and support one another in difficult times;
- found that knowledge enhancement, expertise provided, and structured approach were instrumental and made women feel less overwhelmed;
- felt more confident and empowered to handle both business and life challenges, because "The Growing Club trains you as a person, not just your business";

In the current study, we also inquired about aspects such as wellbeing, confidence, networking and financial situations. In total, 45 participants (aged 20-80), identifying as females, took part in this follow-up study. Since 2018, we expanded our services, and became an employment and enterprise training organisation. For instance, The Sowing Club programme now provides funded, employment skills courses for women who are unwaged or deemed to be socially disadvantaged due being on benefits, having a disability, lone parenting, leaving domestic violence or leaving prison. This is a 15-hour group work programme for any women who are not economically active and would like to explore their options for employment, education or self-employment, aiming to support women to reconnect with their skills and dreams. Our Roots and Shoots programme is still a start-up course, for those who feel ready to start a small business, or have completed the course previously mentioned. During the 12 months programme we aim to take women through a systematic programme of starting and growing a solid sustainable business. We aim to do so by equipping participants with the skills to run a small business and breaking the isolation and build confidence through peer support. We also maintained our 12-month business growth and sustainability programme, Bloom and Grow, which embodies the ethos of our organisation, by bridging the gap between business education and women entrepreneurship. In addition, we hold weekly drop-in sessions to offer support, advice and guidance in terms of IT, accounting, or just a chance to network and socialize with peers outside the workshops. Similarly, we have also organized a wide variety of events such as the Angel's Den, the Slow Fashion Show, the FSB Quarterly Networking, and so on (see our website for information regarding each individual event).

This year we were also interested in how women in entrepreneurship experience previous corporate work environments and/or self-employment in terms of satisfaction,

opportunities, challenges, business success, and so on. It is essential to mention that the greatest challenge we encountered as a service in 2020 was certainly dealing with the unexpected economic and societal circumstances brought by Covid-19. Although the lockdown restrictions and regulations of social distancing impacted the delivery of our services in a face to face facility, we persevered in providing support and guidance online within a week. Given that this research was conducted in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, this significantly impacted women's wellbeing and their economic activity, which will be discussed in more depth in the chapter "Women Entrepreneurship and Finances in the context of Covid-19"

The study employed a mixed methods design, containing both quantitative and qualitative measures (see Appendix A for Questionnaire Items). The quantitative results allowed us to directly compare the efficacy of our programme with the previous results obtained in 2018 (as it can be seen the next chapter), whilst the open questions allowed our participants to use the space provided to reflect upon their career journey. The following sections will discuss themes and patterns of meanings across the qualitative responses. The pivotal themes we identified revolved around Hardships, Wellbeing and New Directions, and Empowerment, where we also identified subthemes of Working with Male Business Owners, Hardships of Motherhood, Supportive Working Environment, and so on (see Appendix B for a full description of Themes and Subthemes). Each of these will further be discussed in the following chapters. Moreover, given the challenging times we experienced in 2020 brought by Covid-19, we included a separate chapter which depicts challenges and experiences of women entrepreneurship and financial situations, in the context of this pandemic.

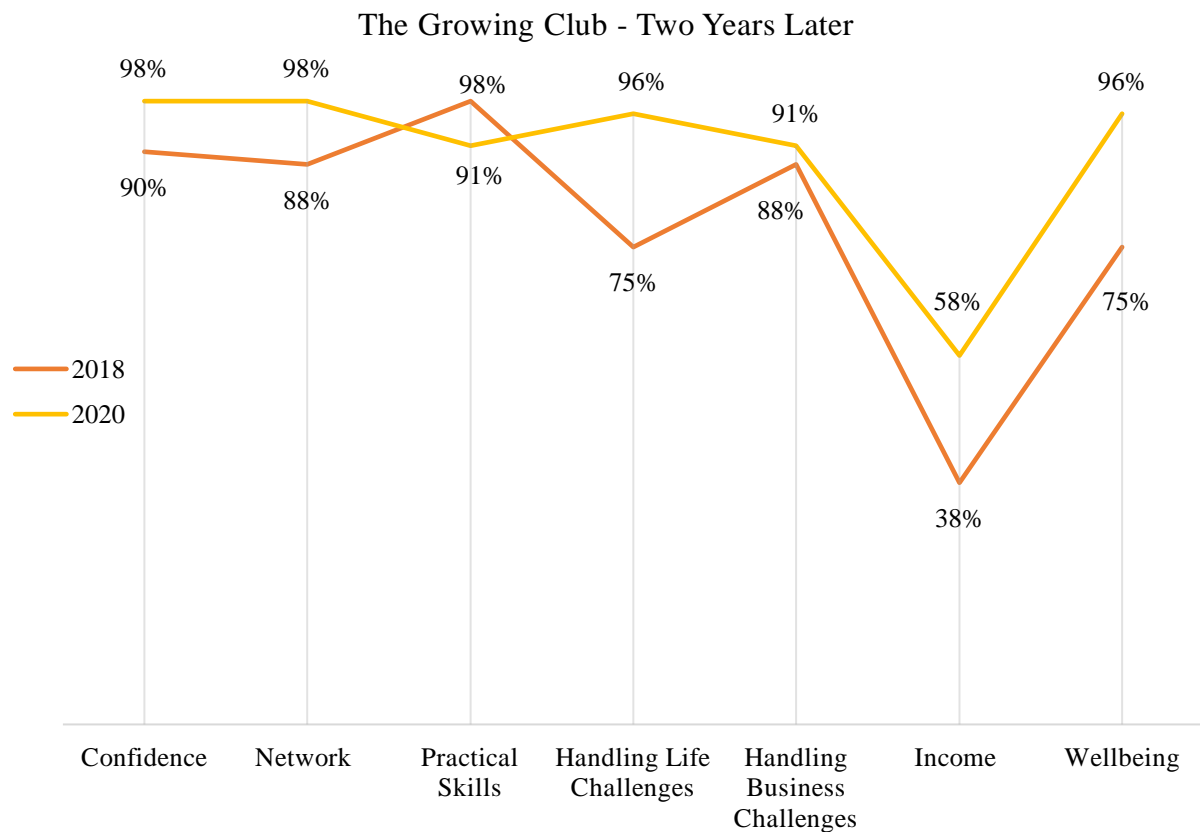
All information provided has been anonymized, and treated with great respect, given the potential sensitive nature of the content, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (2018).

Then and now

The current report entails both journeys of hardships, and growth. As we highlighted two years ago, in the recent years there has been a significant increase in women setting up businesses in the UK. Many of them wish to use their skills to live a fulfilling life post redundancy, perhaps to fit around their domestic responsibilities, or perhaps they wish to “focus on turning [their] passion into a business”, as some of our participants argued. Yet running a business is not a straight-forward option and research tells us that most start-up businesses fail in the first 3 years. The Growing Club CIC is committed to changing those figures and boosting the local economy. It manages to do this by systematically providing the support and training in the processes essential to thrive as a micro-business in the business world.

The figure below depicts the percentages of people reporting an increase in aspects such as confidence, income, network, and wellbeing, as a result of their involvement within our services. As it can be seen, we found an element of growth across all aspects, apart from one, when we compared the data obtained in 2018 with the current results, from 2020. A significant amount of our data regarding networking satisfaction derives from 25 women who benefitted from networking opportunities such as the Graduates Group (6), Mentor training (3), Networking events (10), and Angel’s Den (6). Having participated in these events, we noted that women became significantly more confident, increased their network, feel more prepared to handle business challenges. The holistic approach in ethical training highlighted in 2018 as a major area of impact in our participants’ lives is also present in the current findings. This

Figure 1



time there was a significant increase in the percentage of women telling us they felt more prepared to handle life challenges, having joined our services (96%, compared to 75%). Similarly, more participants expressed that their wellbeing was improved as a result of their involvement with us (ibid.). We endeavoured to reflect a holistic approach in delivering our training programmes. For instance, we recently launched “Healthy you, Healthy Biz”, a programme in which 8 women from the current sample took part in, acknowledges that in order to thrive as a sole trader and avoid burnout, one must be provided with a safe space to grow, have some forms of exercise and relaxation.

In terms of skills acquired through our programme, 91% of women expressed an increase in gaining practical skills as a result of joining our programme. Across all our data, 16 women attended the drop-in sessions, and 14 women attended the skills workshops. Here we offer our service users the opportunity to ask questions, and be provided with IT and accounting guidance, but also benefit from business coaching. A quarter of our participants also attended other diverse networking and training opportunities we offered such as: Voices from the Frontline (3), Women in manufacturing (3), Crafty Women (1), and Sunflowers (2). What is essential, is that in the current study, women were also given the opportunity to expand on their answer choices in an anonymous manner, soon after completing the questionnaire. However, we failed to identify any comments which would allow us to understand the slight decrease in terms of practical support offered. This slight decrease, from 98% (2018) to 91% (2020), could have occurred due to the ambiguity of the question as a general factor. We also note that we expanded in holistic approaches (i.e. running the Healthy You, Healthy Biz course) and experimental programmes (i.e. Sunflowers for women over 50s), as opposed to training offered solely in areas of technical and practical skills.

In terms of practical and financial hardships and support, this years’ circumstances have been particularly challenging due to the economic impact of Covid-19. However, 58% of our participants reported an increase in income, as a result of their involvement within our services. When examining our data, we noticed that the increase in their income is not a representative figure of successfulness, particularly for start-up businesses, and those who invested in employment training. Almost half of our participants (20) took part in the pre-start up and start-up programmes, The Sowing Club (13) and Roots and Shoots (7), with only 11 women being part of the Bloom and Grow Programme, dedicated to women who may have a financial security derived from their businesses. However, even the latter group mentioned they failed to note a financial increase yet, due to necessary investments in their businesses and training courses. Thus, we argue that given the challenging backgrounds most women encountered us from (i.e. being unemployed, feeling isolated, having escaped abusive relationships, having survived life-threatening illnesses), finding the right job or career path was invaluable, as the following comments reiterate:

“Opportunities arose and I have spent the last 14 years running successful businesses in both the craft and catering sectors. I haven't made as much money doing self-employment as I did as an employee, but I wouldn't change the experience!”

What is certain is that most of our participants found it refreshing to look back to their journey, telling us that *“It's good to stop and reflect on how far [they] have come since joining the Growing Club”*. To praise and highlight the growth and journeys we witnessed, we would like to share the following comments:

“Fast forward 4 years, I have built a brand and I am very hopeful for the future. I use the growing club all the time for all kinds of support. I can hold my hand on my heart and say that without the growing club, my life would be very different, and I very much doubt I would be running the business that I am today.”

“I was thinking about this the other day and I feel I've really grown over the 3 years I have been involved. My GC journey has mirrored my self-employment journey and it has been invaluable to have the GC, Jane and all my peers alongside me on this journey. As a sole trader I've not felt alone and felt I could cope through the difficult, challenging times, knowing that others were also on that journey and would understand and be able to empathise.”

Two years after we conducted the first study, we were extremely pleased to identify the same kind and beautiful comments such as the one below:

“The growing club has been totally invaluable to me. At the core of the growing club is a beating heart and the people I have met through this organisation are all very dear to me.”

Hardships

Feeling Undervalued

When we asked participants about their reasons for joining us, we found that people reached out to us from various backgrounds of expectations. Some of our participants told us they “*wanted to meet other women with small businesses, to learn, and share*”, some wished “*to build [their] confidence and look at launching [their] business*”, whilst others joined us with clearer and more specific expectations, as the following comment shows:

“I joined the growing club to learn about running a successful business, specifically to recognize my transferable skills and those that I needed to work on, such as networking, social media.”

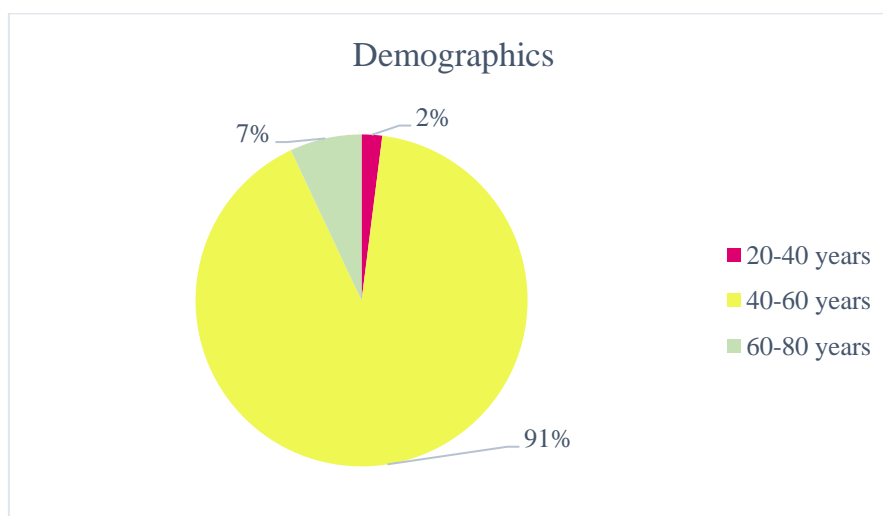
However, most women reached out to us disillusioned and overwhelmed with hardships, as the following comment depicts:

“I left a previous job after having children and becoming disillusioned. I was stressed and suffering from anxiety and had no idea what I was going to do. One day I saw an advert on Facebook and came along to the Roots and Shoots course. This increased my confidence and I was able to find work at the same time.”

We found recurring instances of feeling undervalued, when inquired about participants’ experiences of previous work environment and opportunities. In this sense, they felt lack of appreciation due to various reasons in terms of their true professional potential. We found that age was one of such factors, for instance. In terms of demographics, 91% of our respondents are aged between 40 and 60 years (see Figure 2 below). We came across stories such as the following, which highlight the challenges and lack of opportunities that women have experienced prior to joining us on their journey of growth:

“Women over 50 years of age tend to be overlooked in the workplace and not valued at times in society, my experience after being off sick and going back to the Job Centre was not good, therefore the Growing Club is an essential service for women who are unemployed due various reasons”

Figure 2



Working with Male Business Owners

Given our previous feedback from 2018, where women mentioned they particularly enjoyed our ethical business training due to its the lack of competitiveness and gender-led power imbalance, we decided to further investigate this matter. We invited our participants in a non-directive manner via an open question to share their experiences of working with male business owners (see Appendix A for Questionnaire Items). A great amount of our participants still feel that *“it’s hard to be taken seriously”* in a male predominant networking environment, and that *“as soon as [they] arrived for support at the growing club drop in, [they] felt a feminine, warm, and supportive environment”*. Similarly, we came across unfortunate experiences such as the following:

“The networking and collaboration with male business owners previous to Growing Club had taught me a lot and I had made some really positive connections that still hold true today but there was an important difference in how they dealt with each other and I never really felt taken seriously by the majority - it was as if I was a bored housewife playing at business - they'd kind of look you over to see if it was worth their while connecting and often I'd feel side lined for the other blokes in the room who might look more valuable to them. I never felt that I could really be myself, it was all about 'selling' a positive impression of what you were doing and how business was going. I felt exhausted most of the time and inadequate until I realised that most of the men I was comparing myself to had stay at home wives who were doing everything else for them, they could literally just focus on their business with no distractions!”

Unfortunately, although such gender-led imbalances are actively challenged from a societal point of view, women who contacted us still felt undervalued, experienced lack of confidence and support whilst interacting with male business owners. However, we also encountered balanced opinions such as the following:

“Whoever you work with and for in employment, they can have different agendas. While men can often be seen to be more profit driven, women can also have their own motivations that didn't necessarily sit well with me.”

Thus, perhaps power imbalance could be mostly driven by societal pressures and demands of corporate environments, just as one of our participants outlined in their following comment:

“I have worked for or liaised with many male business owners and the majority of them were fantastic. I found it was the middle management that were dangerous. Dare I say some of these were women, but I understand this more now. I felt women in senior management roles felt they had to be ruthless to make it in a male environment. This was one of the reasons why I couldn't make it in the corporate world. I could not be ruthless and step over people for the needs of any business.”

It may seem that we cannot actively or directly challenge systemic differences around gender or power-led imbalances. However, we found that women training with The Growing Club felt more prepared to handle and challenge inequalities in networking events and within the workplace. This shows that our ethical approach and mission to empower women has had an impact on their way of interacting with other business owners, regardless of their gender, as one of our respondents highlighted:

“I feel more confident now working with male business owners. I do tend to work more with women as the circles I work in are mainly female based. I don't feel as intimidated by people in suits since joining The Growing Club.”

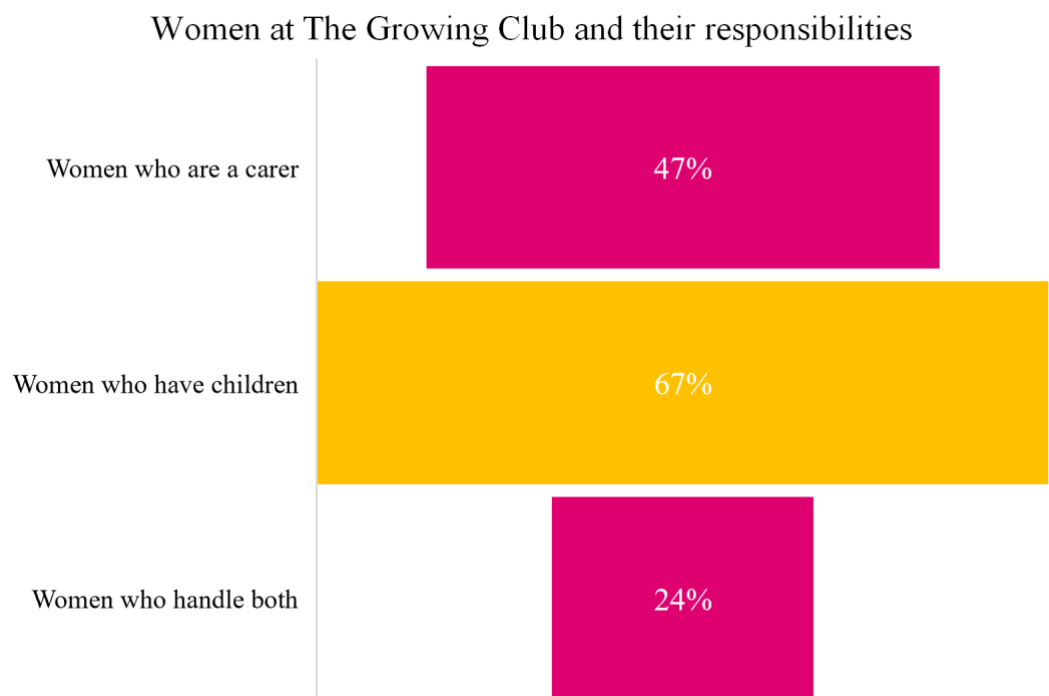
Hardships of Motherhood

“My previous work has been in a corporate business world. I was struggling to balance work and my childcare.”

In sharing their experiences of previous work environments, participants also often expressed they were treated differently when returning to work from their maternity leave. Particularly those who became mothers whilst working previously in corporate environments highlighted that their opportunities and people's attitudes changed once they returned, although our participants believed that their skillset has remained the same. The following comment such instances:

“When I became pregnant, I suddenly found myself removed from the senior management fast track that I had been on for months and was never again considered for it. This was very upsetting - I had been seconded to a post that involved lots of travel away from home and responsibility for no extra pay with the promise of a permanent post when it arose. When this post did arise shortly after announcing my pregnancy, I was stunned to see it offered to a male colleague who had far less experience.”

Figure 3



Moreover, a great number of women training with us will have experienced difficulties balancing responsibilities of motherhood with those of employment or self-employment. Across all data, 47% of women told us they were carers, and 67% told us they have children, as it can be seen in the figure above. Additionally, we found that 24% women who responded

to our survey are carers and have children as well. We refrained from asking questions regarding our participants' responsibilities as carers, or their children's age, as we believed these would be rather invasive. Yet, these percentages alongside comments such as the following ones highlight the need for a different approach to employment opportunities for those who experience hardships in motherhood:

“I was very overwhelmed by the combination of having young children, a husband who worked away a lot and a business that was booming. It was affecting my mental health - feeling like I couldn't cope. I had no one that I could really talk to who had experienced anything similar.”

“After a divorce, I went from full time housewife to being the sole breadwinner. I had no divorce settlement, or house or pension or passive income.”

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that many of these women felt overwhelmed with responsibilities and challenges, reaching a point of burnout. When we asked women if their work-life balance has changed after joining us or turning to self-employment we encountered cases such as the following, which represents merely a sample of responsibilities that most of our participants have:

“Significantly. I was up at 5.30am to the gym, work, and second job, home at 10.30pm, working 17 hours days and proud, seeing working hard like a badge of honour. But no time for me, my partner, my family.”

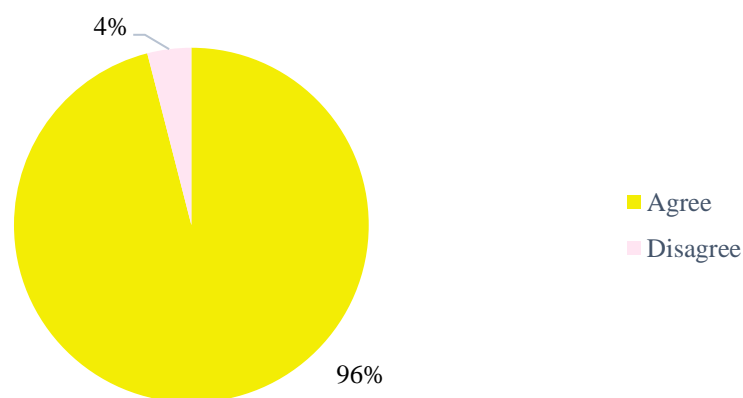
Wellbeing & New Directions

“What I do know is that I will never again put myself in a position where I live to work rather than working to live!”

New Directions and Self-Care

Figure 4

“I feel more prepared to handle life challenges after joining The Growing Club”



After having experienced such hardships in their life and previous work environments, our respondents shared with us their journey towards new directions. As it can be seen in the above figure, this year we found that 96% of our participants feel better prepared to handle life challenges, as a result of their involvement with our services. Indeed, a great amount of comments depicted women prioritising their values, which inspired them to choose new healing directions and follow their passions. The following stories highlight how the change in their approach to business and employment opportunities led to a greater satisfaction:

“[working in a toxic environment] was the breaking point for me. I could barely lift my head off the pillow to function. As much as it was a terrible time in my life, it also created a huge change in my perspective. I was not going to work in an environment that was toxic again. I had wasted too much of my life working to live and everyday was a chore.”

“Stress crept up on me and I took time off to recover and request support. Skipping over the details to where I am today and I have left teaching and I am exploring possibilities, finding time for myself and my family. I want to invest my time and energy into growing a business that I will enjoy.”

Hardships seem to have inspired women to become greatly determined in pursuing their goals and passions. A great amount of our participants overcame life-changing experiences, abusive relationship, broken marriages and survived illnesses such as Cancer. We endeavoured to anonymize each of these scenarios to protect such delicate and sensitive information.

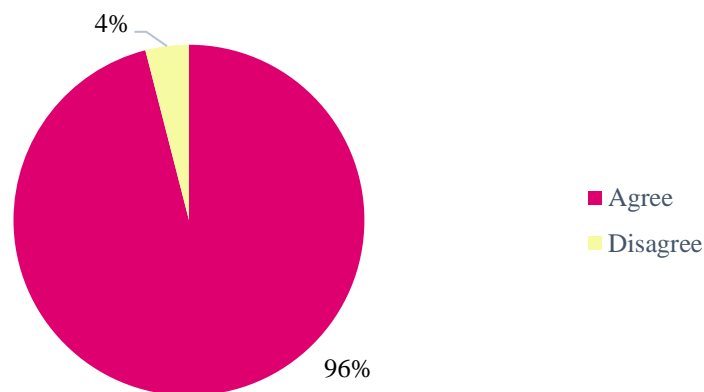
However, as we encountered these humbling stories, we wondered whether we managed to provide any support in such circumstances; we found that we did, as the following comments show:

“Ill health had forced me to give up my career. Three years later, I knew that I had to completely rethink my employment options but due to a loss of self-belief, I needed support and guidance to give me the confidence to seriously consider setting up my own business. That is when I discovered The Growing Club.”

“Returning to what I loved as a child has been powerful, challenging and settling. As a survivor I have had to regrow myself and the growing club has helped me believe in myself again.”

Figure 5

“My wellbeing has improved after joining The Growing Club”



As the above figure shows, 96% of our respondents also told us their wellbeing improved as a result of their involvement with us in their journey of growth. Provided with our support, having attended our courses and events, women *“became much more aware of the importance of self-awareness and self-care”*. Self-care was expressed as allocating sufficient time for themselves, but also for their business, as the following comments show:

“The most important lesson I learnt from The Growing Club was to understand the effect of self-care on the success of my business. I cannot afford to burn out.”

“I make sure I make time for relaxation, exercise and socialising but my business(es) have a much higher priority in my life. I find I don't need as many breaks or holidays as I love what I do.”

Flexibility and Balance

It seems that for most women who turned to self-employment, the idea of having a business was appealing due to the flexibility and personal satisfaction. This newly acquired flexibility eased hardships by creating a balance. It allowed women “*to achieve a better work life balance so that [they] could give [their] children the attention they deserved*”, but also become independent and financially active.

“The difference for me is that now I have more flexibility within my work, e.g. I can meet friends for lunch, go to the gym during the day if I choose, but I will make up the time if I need to”

“It [work life balance] has changed enormously. I am able to be at home to support my children, who find school very challenging. At that time I didn't know from one day to the next whether I was going to get called into School, if my son was going to be sent home etc., this put enormous pressure on me trying to hold a job down, put my 100% commitment into the work I was doing with the children I was working with. Once I made the decision to leave, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. It has been 3 years now since I set up on my own and our lives are much calmer. I am available almost all the time for my children, within reason and this in itself has created a peace of mind.”

Without doubt, “*needing to be flexible with childcare*” has been a recurrent element in most of our participants’ decisions to turn to self-employment. However, taking such a decision is not a straight-forward option. Some mentioned they “*have to constantly remind [themselves] to get organised and pace [themselves] to avoid burnout*”. It seems that for some, this risk of reaching a point of burnout derived from being able to work from home, as the following comment shows:

“My work-life balance has changed enormously. I now spend almost all of my time either working on or thinking about my business, and a lot of things have been left undone - such as housework. I'm happy to spend as many hours as possible on my business and I'm not phased by hard work. However, this has often left me feeling overwhelmed and I feel like I've neglected things such as the cleaning, being there for the children, doing the garden etc.”

Giving Back and Inspiring Others

When approaching new directions in their career paths, women often said that the hardships they encountered had a pivotal role in the type of passions they wished to follow next. As previously mentioned, most women believed that such changes were necessary in order for them to thrive. We also found this became truly beneficial for societal change. For instance, these life-changing obstacles seem to have inspired and motivated them to empower others and give back to the community, as the following comments show:

“I feel I have the chance to influence standards in care training. Wanting to give support to a worthwhile venture - I enjoyed meeting women working for themselves. Some of the students I come across are women embarking on care management and it was useful to reflect on support I could give to them in what is still a male-dominated area.”

“After I got ill with cancer I decided not to return to my old job, and go back to my love of fashion designing also supporting women who had gone through Cancer”

“I would however with the right guidance and support set up my own project aimed at young girls building their confidence and addressing life's challenges.”

Empowerment

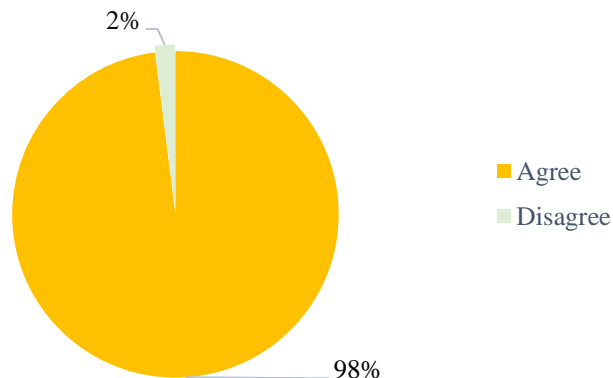
We were pleased to find that 98% of our participants felt empowered as a result of their involvement with our services (see the figure below). A great proportion of the feedback relied on support and its empowering nature. Being part of The Growing Club has been an invaluable experience for its practical and professional support for a great number of our participants, as they have shared with us:

“It's not been easy, but I might have thrown in the towel if it wasn't for GC.”

“My GC journey has mirrored my self-employment journey and it has been invaluable to have the GC, Jane and all my peers alongside me on this journey. As a sole trader I've not felt alone and felt I could cope through the difficult, challenging times, knowing that others were also on that journey and would understand and be able to empathise.”

Figure 6

“I feel empowered as a result of joining The Growing Club”



Confidence

In the same direction, 98% of women participating in our survey expressed an increase in their confidence (see figure 7, on the next page). This increase occurred both as a result of joining The Growing Club, and after having overcome their own hardships, as most participants reported. This confidence enabled participants to gain a work-life balance, prioritise their values accordingly, give back to the community, and expand their horizons from a professional point of view, as it is expressed in the following comments:

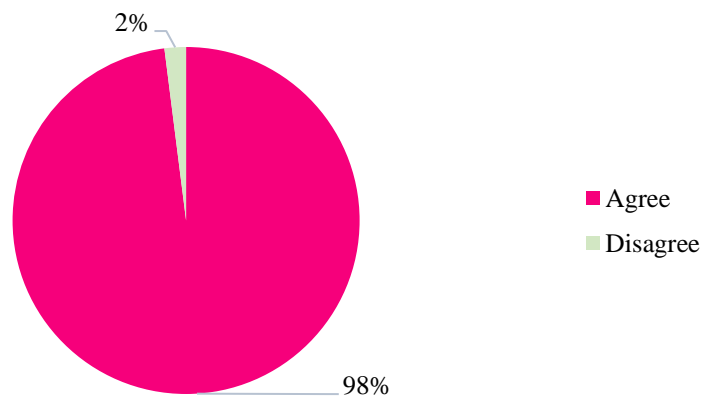
“I think it gave me more confidence to branch out to investigate other directions more suitable to my personal desires and talents.”

“I made some excellent friends in that group and I gained confidence that I could be accepted into the business community and that my skillset would be valued.”

“Before joining Growing Club, I was not able to put my ideas in order about my business. Business is not a small thing I felt that if I couldn't find Growing Club, I could take long time to move forward things. I built my confidence, got connected with many people, leaning how to use social media for business. I haven't started my business yet but in short time I am able to start it shortly. It all because of Growing Club.”

Figure 7

“My confidence increased as a result of joining The Growing Club”



Supportive Working Environment

We were pleased to find that 98% of our respondents told us they increased their network as a result of their involvement with The Growing Club, as Figure 8 shows. Whilst this quantitative measure might represent a network in terms of business colleagues, the collegial support has been a predominant theme across qualitative comments:

“Supportive women around me as a result of my new network. I would not be where I am today had it not been for the Growing Club. I have a lot to thank it for.”

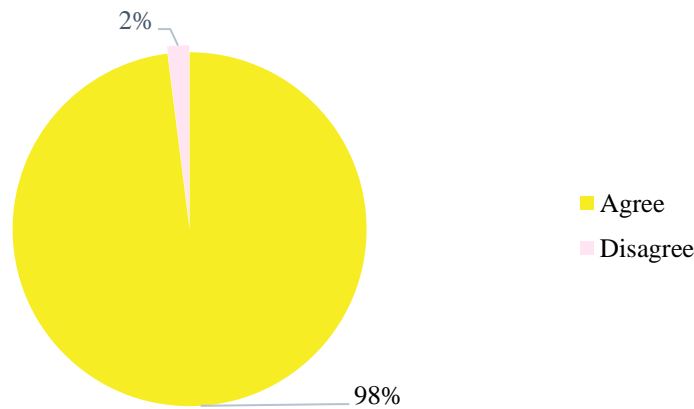
“Having the support from like-minded women has been amazing. There is never a fear of feeling silly by asking a question. I have felt supported and heard all the time.”

“I owe so much to everyone at the Growing Club. From the first time that I walked through the doors, I felt that I was amongst friends and with people I could trust. Trust is everything, the Growing Club felt like a safe place, so much so that I 'dared' to say out loud that I wanted to start my own business.”

“For the first time I had peers, women who were setting up a business themselves, and we were going through the course as a shared experience. After six months, we were introduced to our business mentor who we will have for three years. I can't put into words how great it is to have a successful local businesswoman sharing her skills and experience with me to benefit me and my business.”

Figure 8

"My network has increased as a result of joining The Growing Club"



Given the variety of societal and experiential backgrounds our participants come from, we noted that not all will be so fortunate to have overcome their hardships. Yet we found they still appreciated the presence of The Growing Club in their journey, as one of the respondents expressed:

"my life balance is dictated more by external factors than working schedule. So i cannot say the GC could help in solving the problems, I can say it provides a safe space where is easy to interact."

Our results show that feeling supported was a determinant factor in personal and professional satisfaction amongst our participants, regardless of their work environment. For instance, only 5 out of 45 women had optimistic views and positive opinions on previous corporate environments. Some of these women considered themselves to be *"very lucky to have enjoyed most of [their] jobs"*, some looked back and told us they *"worked in a previous job for nearly 20 years and much, as [they] loved [their] colleagues and the camaraderie"*; whilst others found previous job satisfaction, as the following comment shows:

"I enjoyed seeing the children flourish, in confidence and academically. I would work in a group and as a 121. There was always something different every day, new challenges. I had a good support network where there was always someone at hand to help if needs be."

As previously mentioned, nearly all our participants told us that being able to enjoy what they do has been for a pivotal element in their decision to start their own business and venture in the entrepreneurs' world. These stories also certainly reiterate how important it is to maintain a supportive working environment, to ensure that businesses will thrive, regardless of the outside challenging factors.

Women Entrepreneurship in the context of Covid-19

“... just coping with Covid-19 etc and being isolated has impacted on my energy levels, as emotionally coping with this has been hard.”

Two years ago, the feeling of 'isolation' was predominant for most women who looked after children & family members in the previous report. They found it difficult to connect with others, as they felt overwhelmed with household and family responsibilities, or felt they lacked the confidence to approach other colleagues or business owners. Now however, due to the current crisis, the recurrent feeling of isolation we encountered in our data suggests different meanings. It encapsulates confinement, fear, lack of socialising with anyone other than their household members. Understandably, participants expressed their concerns about their own safety and health, but mostly that they feel uncertain as to what may happen next. We found the following directions in which our findings led us when we explored this data.

Wellbeing and Productivity in the context of COVID-19

On the one hand, some of our participants found productivity during the lockdown regulations. Self-care also seemed to be an emergent thing, as participants became aware of the indispensable aspect of looking after themselves, particularly during these times. Having to stay at home allowed some of them to work on their skills set, and find a balance, as the following comments demonstrate:

“I am now working from home and I must say that this has improved my working life. I suffer from anxiety and the current situation is scary; I am pleased to be able to stay at home.”

“It didn't affect my business in terms of planning and producing. I used this time to improve and learn new techniques”

“It's actually allowed me the time and the motivation to get it together!”

In some of these optimistic cases participants benefitted from their family's support (i.e., a partner at home to share responsibilities with). However, all parents found themselves having to compensate for the lack of support from educational systems. We found that particularly single parents looking after their children, whilst managing their business, career development, which most of the times represents the household income, encountered tremendous challenges in continuing their work from home, *“Consequently, doing 100% of the care”*. Some found pleasure and enjoyment in taking over household responsibilities, as the following comment tells us:

“I have taken over all the childcare housework, gardening and diy. So, I am very busy with a long list of tasks I have been ignoring whilst working. These are 90% pleasurable and rewarding tasks.”

Yet, the other reality of the current climate reveals a tremendous impact on women's wellbeing, as they became overwhelmed with balancing childcare and running a business from

home, or merely trying to sustain their homes financially. We also found a predominant sense of guilt and worry amongst our participants, that have taken a toll on their wellbeing, as the following comments show.

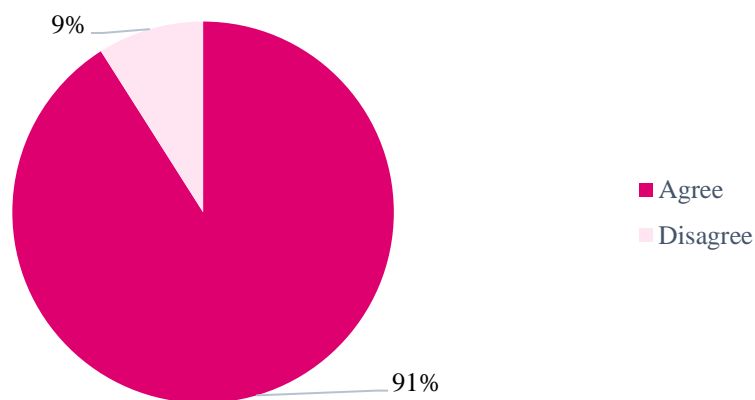
“[My business has] totally stalled since I am now trying to home-school children. I’m not making anything...I don’t have the energy to work on online selling.”

“So, although my business hasn’t been directly affected by this, my wellbeing and anxiety have been massively affected by financial worries and pressures which have meant that I have not been able to motivate myself to do as much work as I had hoped I would be able to.”

Business Situation in the context of COVID

Figure 9

“I feel more prepared to handle business challenges after joining The Growing Club”



As the above figure shows, we found that 91% participants told us they felt prepared to handle business challenges as a result of being involved with The Growing Club CIC. This was particularly essential in March 2020, as sole traders faced unexpected challenges in their delivery of services, and in the worst cases the continuity of their services. In the current circumstances, flexibility was favourable only for those who found themselves in the position of being able to transfer their work to online working environments, as the following examples show:

“While many other businesses are struggling during the lockdown, I am unexpectedly finding that I am in conversation with a number of potential clients. I am also finding lots of free online training courses that I am making the most of. I have already 'attended' a LinkedIn course and as a direct result, have set up my LinkedIn profile. I've also attended a Facebook for Business course and will soon set my Facebook business page up. There are lots of things that can be done 'behind the scenes' towards my business during the lockdown.”

“I am an online business. I used to attend networking event but now they are online, so I network that way. I used to showcase my collection at events so that has changed. Now I am having to do lives in my living room.”

The lack of employment opportunities and economic impact worsened previous situations and experiences. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies¹ reiterated that young people (under 25s) and women have been drastically impacted from an economical point of view, by the recent COVID-19 measures of closures and restrictions in sectors of hospitality and non-food related retail. This coincides with what we found in our study. Women who found themselves in between jobs, with less previous financial stability and security, transitioning from part-time employment in hospitality or retail towards sole trading prior to March 2020, were left with uncertainties and little to no economic support. As we were conducting the survey in April 2020, the government released the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. However, many participants were unable to apply, as they could not meet the required criteria, particularly if they were part of the start-up or pre-start up programmes. In this context, women were truly overwhelmed, left feeling hopeless, and encountered tremendous financial challenges, as the following comments reiterate:

“All my work was wiped out in COVID-19. I had literally nothing left. I'm using the time to support families in lockdown and to encourage people to stay at home”

“It's made it really difficult for me. I do have my parents to look after, but the main jobs are on me. I struggle to concentrate and finish any job and then when I get back to it, it takes me a while to get going.”

“Some of my work had been put on hold or has slowed down so I am unsure when I can continue. From June onwards my income will reduce dramatically.”

In this sense, The Growing Club made it its mission to provide practical, and psychological and emotional support in these unexpected circumstances. The Growing Club has been holding weekly virtual drop-in sessions that have become weekly goal setting and check-in sessions. We introduced a daily 10-minute neck and shoulder exercise session live on our Facebook page along with weekly Monday morning workshops, supporting women to start their weeks well, prioritise and stay focussed. As we mentioned in our blog², *“Keeping in touch and helping to keep women buoyant has become our priority”*. When we looked at the quantitative measures, 91% of participants told us they felt optimistic about the future overall, due to their involvement with The Growing Club. This shows that despite the current economic circumstances we still managed to successfully provide support and encouragement, as the following comment shows:

“I am scared about the future but being part of the Growing Club gives me confidence that we can work together in the future, it is an amazing supportive network, and I have met some lovely friends.”

¹ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14791>

² <https://thegrowingclub.co.uk/coronavirus-have-women-fallen-off-the-business-agenda-again/>

Report Summary

Given the holistic approach we employed this year, by exploring experiences of previous working environments and opportunities, we uncovered more aspects of our participants' journeys towards employment or self-employment and entrepreneurship. Whilst the previous report in 2018 focused on the efficacy and sustainability of the training programmes delivered by The Growing Club, this year also placed an emphasis on where women found themselves prior to joining us. Above all, we can argue they all experienced a range of hardships and became empowered to find new healing directions in following their passions.

The results demonstrated that a great amount of our participants felt, and perhaps still feel undervalued in their previous workplaces but also in society. Most women face the challenges of being single parents, juggling responsibilities of childcare, being a carer for their loved ones, whilst earning a household income, and somehow finding time to look after themselves. The outcomes also highlight the need for further financial and societal support for women who care for family members with poor mental health, women who escaped abusive relationships, and women overwhelmed with life-threatening illnesses, such as cancer. We continue to provide emotional and practical support given our recent funding opportunities which enabled us to continue to deliver our Sowing Club programme, for instance. This was very much appreciated, and our participants found it invaluable. However, this would not be possible in the absence of further support in the future, given the drastic economic and psychological impact that Covid-19 had on these women's lives.

We also encountered opinions around gender led imbalances in the workplace and enterprise training environments. On a larger scheme it may seem that we overcame such concerns from a societal point of view, yet we found that many women still experience gender-led inequalities in their workplace. For instance, when returning from maternity leave, women still experience disproportionate financial and professional opportunities, as opposed to their male colleagues, as most of our participants highlighted. The fact that women participating in this study highly appreciated once again a welcoming and supportive environment that lacks corporate competitiveness, reiterates the need for a shift in training approaches. Our results demonstrated that we successfully implemented ethical approaches to business and employment training, by empowering women to thrive in their career journey.

When meeting us, a great majority of women were reconsidering their values, after having experienced such hardships. This inspired them to follow different career paths, inspire others, and contribute to social innovation and societal change, by creating further employment opportunities themselves. Sole traders soon discovered that flexibility is a great asset, in terms of managing a work-life balance, but only when provided with the appropriate coaching and practical support. There is still a great need of support to allow women to maintain a healthy balance when working from home and avoid burnout. As we found, burnout can lead to serious negative psychological and economic consequences, particularly for lone parents and women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In this sense, we continued to empower women in finding the confidence to pursue their passions. We did so, by providing practical support via our workshops, drop-in sessions and networking opportunities. Thus, further stories

of successful empowerment such as those presented in this study would be impossible in the absence of further funding opportunities.

It is certain that Covid-19 impacted their experience and lead to overwhelming feelings of isolation and hopelessness, but also great financial difficulties. Lone parents felt particularly overwhelmed in balancing childcare and domestic responsibilities, whilst providing a household income. These economic challenges highlight the great need for economic and practical support for women. This would enable them to thrive and fully recover, not merely survive from a professional and economical aspect, particularly in the context of Covid-19. Although certain schemes such as the Self-Employment Grant, and Furlough Schemes were implemented, many women who were training with us were unable to benefit from such opportunities, as they could not yet meet the criteria. It seems that once again, women in entrepreneurship have been overlooked and undervalued. Particularly during these times, services like ours have been invaluable. Above all, we endeavoured to continue to provide support and guidance online in these challenging times. We were told this has been invaluable, particularly during these times of great difficulty.

Appendix A
Questionnaire Items

Part 1 –Quantitative Data Gathering

Which Growing Club Service have you attended or are currently attending? (Please tick as many as appropriate)

- The Growth Programme (now known as Bloom & Grow)
- The Sowing Club
- Roots and Shoots
- Graduates Group
- Voices from the frontline
- Angels' Den
- Drop In Sessions
- Crafty Women
- Sunflowers (women aged 50+)
- Networking events
- Skills Workshops
- Mentor Training
- Women in micro-manufacturing
- Healthy You Healthy Biz
- Other (Please specify) _____

As a result of my involvement with The Growing Club services....

	Definitely agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Definitely disagree
My confidence levels have increased	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I built relationships and increased my network	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I gained practical skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am more prepared to face life challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel prepared to face business challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My income has increased	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My wellbeing has improved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel more empowered	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel optimistic about my future prospects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- Did you feel welcomed and included at The Growing Club?

- Yes
- No
- Rather not say

Part 2 – Open Ended Questions

If any of the following questions do not apply to your current situation, please feel free to skip or adjust your answers accordingly.

1. Please share with us what brought you to The Growing Club and where you were before joining us. You may wish to mention your educational and employment background. Please tell us about your journey with your business, if you have one.

2. Please use this space to share with us your story? What (if any) is your experience of your previous employment? For instance, if you found yourself working in a corporate environment, what was your experience of that?

3. Thinking back to your life before you joined The Growing Club, has your work-life balance changed? Please tell us in what ways this has changed

4. What can you tell us about your experience of working with male business owners prior to and after joining The Growing Club?

5. What else has influenced your growth so far? Please share with us any aspects of your story that helped you become who you are today.

6. We appreciate this is a particularly challenging time, so we were wondering if your business has been affected by COVID-19? If so, how much has it affected it?

7. How has the situation with COVID-19 impacted your work-life balance? For instance, if applicable, is your partner sharing child-care responsibilities?

8. What motivated you to spend your precious time helping us with this questionnaire?

9. How do you feel at the end of this process of answering these questions and reflecting on your journey?

Part 3 - Additional Information

10. Do you have children?

- Yes
- No
- Rather not say

11. Are you a carer?

- Yes
- No
- Rather not say

12. Are you...

- Single
- Married
- Widowed
- In a relationship
- Separated
- Divorced
- Other _____

13. How old are you?

- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- 60-70
- 70-80

Appendix B

Table of Themes and Comments

Theme	Data Extracts for each Subtheme
Hardships	<p data-bbox="450 459 725 491"><u>Feeling Undervalued</u></p> <p data-bbox="450 496 1675 528"><i>“As I turned 40, I felt trapped in an environment I didn’t enjoy, but gave me financial stability”</i></p> <p data-bbox="450 568 2011 676"><i>“Women over 50 years of age tend to be overlooked in the workplace and not valued at times in society, my experience after being off sick and going back to the Job Centre was not good, therefore the Growing Club is an essential service for women who are unemployed due various reasons”</i></p> <p data-bbox="450 719 1973 828"><i>“I replaced somebody who had left with a nervous breakdown, was given a tiny bit of part-time help that wasn't nearly adequate and expected to be grateful, a department run by a bully who targeted pregnant women. I have no idea why I didn't leave that department before getting pregnant, but after having my baby, I decided I couldn't go back.”</i></p> <p data-bbox="450 868 2018 1008"><i>“My first job was as an office junior and I enjoyed the work, but my manageress was a bully. At 15 I was not able to stand up for myself until she went too far. I walked out and swore I would never again be treated so badly. Since then I was able to say to new employers, treat me right and I will prove myself a worthy employee. I have had 3 main amazing jobs and met some great people”</i></p> <p data-bbox="450 1048 2024 1157"><i>“I realised I needed to increase my income to cover the cost of fees. 10 years ago I worked as a Java developer, however it seemed pointless applying for jobs after such a long time as my technical skills are out of date and I did not feel like employers would give my CV a second glance.”</i></p> <p data-bbox="450 1197 1951 1305"><i>“I hated the corporate life. I found it tolerable if I had supportive managers but unbearable if I got a manager that micromanaged me and was inflexible . I work hard and am flexible and hated when a manager wouldn’t give me any autonomy.”</i></p>

“I often felt that my skills were not recognised and the work soon made me bored. In 2010 I took the plunge and became self employed although I still supplemented my income with the odd days work, I really wanted to give it up and concentrate on my businesses.”

“I spent many years previously as an IT project manager for US giant IBM. It had become a very stressful and high pressured role and environment over the years as my experience grew and this affected my health eventually so that I took voluntary redundancy and started working for myself then went on to setup my own business.”

Working with Male Business Owners

“I firmly believe that attitudes towards gender have worked against me more times in my life than I care to think about. A serious lack of confidence and faith in myself on top of this have contributed to not being able to forge myself any kind of career.”

“The networking and collaboration with male business owners previous to Growing Club had taught me a lot and I had made some really positive connections that still hold true today but there was an important difference in how they dealt with each other and I never really felt taken seriously by the majority - it was as if I was a bored housewife playing at business - they'd kind of look you over to see if it was worth their while connecting and often I'd feel side lined for the other blokes in the room who might look more valuable to them. I never felt that I could really be myself, it was all about 'selling' a positive impression of what you were doing and how business was going. I felt exhausted most of the time and inadequate until I realised that most of the men I was comparing myself to had stay at home wives who were doing everything else for them, they could literally just focus on their business with no distractions!”

“Whoever you work with and for in employment, they can have different agendas. While men can often be seen to be more profit driven, women can also have their own motivations that didn't necessarily sit well with me.”

“I found it very odd and fake, quite competitive. Now I feel more confident I am increasing my network with men who fit my ethos and where I think we can be of mutual benefit”

“Due to my previous experiences where male were dominant, I can say confidently that I don't have any problem dealing with men.”

“I was employed in a competitive and stressful male-dominated environment. I was the only woman on a sales desk of 6, and the pressure was on me to perform better than my colleagues. Luckily I was able to do that with little or no help from my teammates, but that pressure took its toll on my health.”

“I found the business owner I worked for as a freelancer was not good at his job which was to manage projects and didn't support me in my role for their company. His communication was exceedingly poor and often on the hoof and in inappropriate places and times. The lack of values in that company led me to leave without any replacement income in place, I felt that passionately about it. His company's treatment of me helped me realise I needed to work with people with similar values and since then my world has exponentially grown. I hope to eventually see the income following this but at the moment I am just building networks.”

“I feel more confident now working with male business owners. I do tend to work more with women as the circles I work in are mainly female based. I don't feel as intimidated by people in suits since joining The Growing Club.”

“I feel jealous of their dominance and presence.”

“Some of the networking I attend are very masculine and it's hard to be taken seriously. As soon as arrived for support at the growing club drop in ... I felt a feminine, warmth and supportive environment. I've loved the webinars and they appeal to me a lot more than most of the business focused sales coach ones I have also attended.”

“I haven't really had a problem working with male business owners, although I do see them as having a much easier time of it. I can't imagine many of them worrying about how they are going to find time to wash the pots, vacuum the house or what they are going to cook for tea.”

“I have worked for or liaised with many Male business owners and the majority of them were fantastic. I found it was the middle management that were dangerous. Dare I say some of these were women, but I understand this more now. I felt women in senior management roles felt they had to be ruthless to make it in a male environment. This was one of the reasons why I couldn't make it in the corporate world. I could not be ruthless and step over people for the needs of any business.”

Hardships of Motherhood

“My previous work has been in a corporate business world. I was struggling to balance work and my childcare.”

“Without going into too much detail, I moved back to my home town where I was starting again but with a child. Due to my circumstances, I had to re-evaluate my current situation, back then, and find something that allowed me to be with my daughter a lot more. After a few long conversations with a couple of close friends, I decided to go start my own business.”

“When I became pregnant, I suddenly found myself removed from the senior management fast track that I had been on for months and was never again considered for it. This was very upsetting - I had been seconded to a post that involved lots of travel away from home and responsibility for no extra pay with the promise of a permanent post when it arose. When this post did arise shortly after announcing my pregnancy, I was stunned to see it offered to a male colleague who had far less experience.”

“Like a lot of business women, my partner blows hot and cold about my business. He's very happy and proud of me in the good times but I'm the bad times he thinks I'm selfish and tells me (at length) that I should consider working in a supermarket. He does not see how the flexibility of my working situation benefits our family because so much of what I do, especially in terms of supporting our children, is invisible to him. My mum deliberately never asks about my business or asks me weird left-field questions. Last month she asked me if I force children to join in my sessions. And send to think it couldn't possibly be true that I never do. I'm not complaining, I live my mum and my partner, but it's not where I get support for my business and this is why I appreciate the Growing Club so much.”

“I was very overwhelmed by the combination of having young children, a husband who worked away a lot and a business that was booming. It was affecting my mental health - feeling like I couldn't cope. I had no one that I could really talk to who had experienced anything similar.”

“After a divorce, I went from full time housewife to being the sole breadwinner. I had no divorce settlement, or house or pension or passive income.”

<p>Wellbeing & New Directions</p>	<p><u>New Directions and Self-Care</u></p> <p><i>“What I do know is that I will never again put myself in a position where I live to work rather than working to live!”</i></p> <p><i>“The corporate environment I worked in was lacking in innovation and creativity which I longed for, working for myself has unlocked the doors to this and in particular working in a congruent way in relations to my values”</i></p> <p><i>“[working in a toxic environment] was the breaking point for me. I could barely lift my head off the pillow to function. As much as it was a terrible time in my life. it also created a huge change in my perspective. I was not going to work in an environment that was toxic again. I had wasted too much of my life working to live and everyday was a chore.”</i></p> <p><i>“Stress crept up on me and I took time off to recover and request support. Skipping over the details to where I am today and I have left teaching and I am exploring possibilities, finding time for myself and my family. I want to invest my time and energy into growing a business that I will enjoy.”</i></p> <p><i>“Ill health had forced me to give up my career. Three years later, I knew that I had to completely rethink my employment options but due to a loss of self-belief, I needed support and guidance to give me the confidence to seriously consider setting up my own business. That is when I discovered The Growing Club.”</i></p> <p><i>“Returning to what I loved as a child has been powerful, challenging and settling. As a survivor I have had to regrow myself and the growing club has helped me believe in myself again.”</i></p> <p><i>“The most important lesson I learnt from The Growing Club was to understand the effect of self-care on the success of my business. I cannot afford to burn out.”</i></p> <p><i>“I make sure I make time for relaxation, exercise and socialising but my business(es) have a much higher priority in my life. I find I don't need as many breaks or holidays as I love what I do.”</i></p> <p><u>Flexibility and Balance</u></p> <p><i>“The difference for me is that now I have more flexibility within my work, e.g. I can meet friends for lunch, go to the gym during the day if I choose, but I will make up the time if I need to”</i></p> <p><i>“I had found large organisations could have unhelpful working cultures, and I wanted to have more control over my working life and be able to be the one to make the decisions. Setting up my own business allows me to do this.</i></p>
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I am also able to draw on many threads from my past life, such as in academic writing, the environmental sciences, the art world, and the legal world. I can make decisions about who I'd like my clients to be. I much prefer being my own boss”

“The most important lesson I learn from The Growing Club is to understand the effect of self care on the success of my business. I cannot afford to burn out.”

“Okay, this [work-life balance] is tricky one because it has probably gone the other way for me, but it needed. I do need to find a better work balance and this recent down time has been very healing for me, and my work life balance is going to change very soon, for the better”

“I became much more aware of the importance of self awareness and self care”

“Skipping over the details to where I am today and i have left teaching and I am exploring possibilities, finding time for myself and my family. I want to invest my time and energy into growing a business that I will enjoy.”

“It [work life balance] has changed enormously. I am able to be at home to support my children, who find school very challenging. At that time I didn't know from one day to the next whether I was going to get called into School, if my son was going to be sent home etc., this put enormous pressure on me trying to hold a job down, put my 100% commitment into the work I was doing with the children I was working with. Once I made the decision to leave, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. It has been 3 years now since I set up on my own and our lives are much calmer. I am available almost all the time for my children, within reason and this in itself has created a peace of mind.”

Giving Back and Inspiring Others

“I feel I have the chance to influence standards in care training. Wanting to give support to a worthwhile venture - I enjoyed meeting women working for themselves. Some of the students I come across are women embarking on care management and it was useful to reflect on support I could give to them in what is still a male-dominated area.”

“I hated the politics governing the provision of adult education locally. I was constantly fighting to keep standards of training high while being required to make cutbacks. When self employed I had been able to prioritise training and could see the effect that had on quality of care provision. feel I have the chance to influence standards in care training.”

	<p><i>“After I got ill with cancer I decided not to return to my old job, and go back to my love of fashion designing also supporting women who had gone through Cancer”</i></p> <p><i>“I would however with the right guidance and support set up my own project aimed at young girls building their confidence and addressing life's challenges.”</i></p> <p><i>“Supportive women around me as a result of my new network. I would not be where I am today had it not been for the Growing Club. I have a lot to thank it for. I now am a Director and love helping other women to achieve success. I also devised and ran workshops which was incredibly rewarding.”</i></p> <p><i>“The skills I gained definitely helped me stay on track and improve my income. I enjoyed the programme so much, I trained as a workshop trainer and now offer the course to others”</i></p>
Empowerment	<p><u>The Growing Club as Indispensable</u></p> <p><i>“It's not been easy, but I might have thrown in the towel if it wasn't for GC.”</i></p> <p><i>“I have made more business connections since joining The Growing Club and formed more friendships. It has been so valuable being able to talk to women in business and getting and giving advice”</i></p> <p><i>“I use the growing club all the time for all kinds of support. I can hold my hand on my heart and say that without the growing club, my life would be very different and I very much doubt I would be running the business that I am today.”</i></p> <p><i>“The growing club helped me focus on turning my passion into a business ”</i></p> <p><i>“I am extremely grateful to Jane and her team for supporting me this far. I am inspired by the other women I see around me who have developed businesses and I feel I will be able to undertake a project in the near future”</i></p> <p><i>“I feel the growing club has a valuable role to provide training and support for women running their own business.”</i></p> <p><i>“You do life changing work and you've really inspired me and helped me see my potential and skills. I want to let others see how wonderful you are.”</i></p> <p><i>“Jane and GC have been invaluable.”</i></p>

“I was thinking about this the other day and I feel I've really grown over the 3 years I have been involved. My GC journey has mirrored my self-employment journey and it has been invaluable to have the GC, Jane and all my peers alongside me on this journey. As a sole trader I've not felt alone and felt I could cope through the difficult, challenging times, knowing that others were also on that journey and would understand and be able to empathise.”

Confidence

“Over the last 4 years since GC2 I've definitely had more confidence about the direction our business needed to go, and the network of women that I can turn to is fantastic”

“I have had a massive journey in starting and building my business and the Growing Club has played a very large part of my journey, meeting peers and women in a similar position, exploring our futures together and getting a mentor particularly has transformed me. I have gained massively in confidence and self assuredness.”

“I made some excellent friends in that group and I gained confidence that I could be accepted into the business community and that my skillset would be valued.”

“I was a little lost how to move forward. My business skills were so rusty and I had no experience in my new industry. I joined the growing club in the hope that it would help me get back on the horse and give me the much needed skills I needed to run my own business. I was one of the first cohorts to attend this new enterprise, especially for women. My confidence wasn't good and I suffered terribly from anxiety. Fast forward 4 years, I am now a micro manufacturer, I have workshop premises in the city centre. I do still have many issues and I wouldn't say I am home and dry yet, far from it, but I have built a brand and I am very hopeful for the future. I use the growing club all the time for all kinds of support. I can hold my hand on my heart and say that without the growing club, my life would be very different and I very much doubt I would be running the business that I am today.”

“I don't yet have a business but the sowing club and Healthy me, healthy Biz has definitely supported me to address serious issues that were neglected and damaged due to changes in teaching and the stress I experienced. I feel more happy in my own skin than I have for two years. I am learning to relax and my creativity has started to return.”

“She [Jane] is giving me the courage and space to believe I can be more than what I had become. The courage to enjoy different successes to before. For success to also look different. In a nutshell I am grateful.”

“Before joining Growing Club, I was not able to put my ideas in order about my business. Business is not a small thing I felt that if I couldn't find Growing Club, I could take long time to move forward things. I built my confidence, got connected with many people, leaning how to use social media for business. I haven't started my business yet but in short time I am able to start it shortly. It all because of Growing Club.”

“I think it gave me more confidence to branch out to investigate other directions more suitable to my personal desires and talents.”

“It has actually given me a huge confidence boost. I am excited to return to work and have spent time putting a few things into place for when we return.”

Supportive Working Environment

“Supportive women around me as a result of my new network. I would not be where I am today had it not been for the Growing Club. I have a lot to thank it for.”

“As I've been joined to the Growing Club, Jane in particular, and her facebook posts have helped me get linked to others who share similar values and join courses which have helped me learn and grow.”

“Having the support from like-minded women has been amazing. There is never a fear of feeling silly by asking a question. I have felt supported and heard all the time.”

“The workshops are bright, stimulating and take place in a safe environment. I have made some good friends in The Growing Club. I know that if I decide to take my business further I will be in the right place to do so and I will receive all the inspiration and confidence I need.”

“I value the Growing Club and the relationships and opportunities it has afforded me”

“I came in as a long-standing business owner hoping to gain more knowledge and network. I've enjoyed my association very much, I feel it's helped my business and I've made excellent connection.”

	<p><i>“I owe so much to everyone at the Growing Club. From the first time that I walked through the doors, I felt that I was amongst friends and with people I could trust. Trust is everything, the Growing Club felt like a safe place, so much so that I 'dared' to say out loud that I wanted to start my own business.”</i></p> <p><i>“Being part of a female only cohort was so special as it removed all inhibitions to sharing experiences, supporting each other and realising that you are not alone in how you are feeling. This is in no small part due to Jane's leadership and coaching style!”</i></p> <p><i>“When I joined the Sowing club, I was welcomed and treated with respect I was listened to and given a great deal of support, encouragement and motivated. I enjoyed the group I was involved with and have made some lovely friends.”</i></p> <p><i>“For the first time I had peers, women who were setting up a business themselves, and we were going through the course as a shared experience. After six months, we were introduced to our business mentor who we will have for three years. I can't put into words how great it is to have a successful local businesswoman sharing her skills and experience with me to benefit me and my business.”</i></p>
<p>Women Entrepreneurship in the context of Covid-19</p>	<p><u>Wellbeing, Productivity and Businesses in the context of COVID-19</u></p> <p><i>“just coping with Covid-19 etc and being isolated has impacted on my energy levels, as emotionally coping with this has been hard.”</i></p> <p><i>“I am now working from home and I must say that this has improved my working life. I suffer from anxiety and the current situation is scary; I am pleased to be able to stay at home.”</i></p> <p><i>“It didn't affect my business in terms of planning and producing. I used this time to improve and learn new techniques”</i></p> <p><i>“It's actually allowed me the time and the motivation to get it together!”</i></p> <p><i>“I have taken over all the childcare housework, gardening and diy. So, I am very busy with a long list of tasks I have been ignoring whilst working. These are 90% pleasurable and rewarding tasks.”</i></p> <p><i>“I am scared about the future, but being part of the Growing Club gives me confidence that we can work together in the future, it is an amazing supportive network, and I have met some lovely friends”</i></p>

“So, although my business hasn't been directly affected by this, my wellbeing and anxiety have been massively affected by financial worries and pressures which have meant that I have not been able to motivate myself to do as much work as I had hoped I would be able to.”

“I am now working from home and I must say that this has improved my working life. I suffer from anxiety and the current situation is scary; I am pleased to be able to stay at home - but not just that. I appreciate the advantages of working from home in as much as I have more time with my husband, my two hounds are much happier and I am starting to sleep better despite my anxiety. I hope to be able to spend more time home working if and when things approach normality.”

“While many other businesses are struggling during the lockdown, I am unexpectedly finding that I am in conversation with a number of potential clients. I am also finding lots of free online training courses that I am making the most of. I have already 'attended' a LinkedIn course and as a direct result, have set up my LinkedIn profile. I've also attended a Facebook for Business course and will soon set my Facebook business page up. There are lots of things that can be done 'behind the scenes' towards my business during the lockdown.”

“I am an online business. I used to attend networking events but now they are online, so I network that way. I used to showcase my collection at events so that has changed. Now I am having to do lives in my living room.”

“Opportunities arose and I have spent the last 14 years running successful businesses in both the craft and catering sectors. I haven't made as much money doing self-employment as I did as an employee, but I wouldn't change the experience!”

“All my work was wiped out in COVID-19. I had literally nothing left. I'm using the time to support families in lockdown and to encourage people to stay at home”

“It's made it really difficult for me. I do have my parents to look after, but the main jobs are on me. I struggle to concentrate and finish any job and then when I get back to it, it takes me a while to get going.”

“Some of my work had been put on hold or has slowed down so I am unsure when I can continue. From June onwards my income will reduce dramatically.”

