



# Women in Leadership Case Study

Indiya Kurlus, Inclusion & Diversity Manager

I graduated with a BA (Hons) in Sociology and Social Policy from the University of Stirling in 2004. During my studies I worked as a customer service advisor for Scottish & Southern Energy where I obtained an NVQ in Customer Service Level 2 whilst also studying towards my degree. After I graduated I saw an advert for a student placement in the information and research team at SCRA and successfully applied. It was a short-term post – three months – but it gave me the opportunity to get postgraduate research experience and was the start of my 'proper' career.

*“Giving up a permanent post for a very short-term one when I had a mortgage and bills to pay was a risk, but it was one I had to take if I wanted to develop. As it turns out, it was a good move, but it was scary. Sometimes, though, you have to take a leap of faith – I'm not sure I'd be where I am today if it wasn't for that jump into the unknown.”*

During my first stint with SCRA I supported the information and research team and was given a specific piece of research to do. As my placement was coming to an end, the manager extended it by another three months and I attended an international conference co-hosted by SCRA, the British Council and the then Scottish Executive which brought together experts in child protection and welfare from around the world and I authored the conference report.

Unfortunately the placement couldn't be extended any further so I successfully applied for a Research Worker post at the Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health (SDC) (now part of the Mental Health Foundation) – a not-for-profit research and development organisation. I worked full-time and was involved in large scale evaluations of national initiatives (such as the See Me campaign, Doing Well by People With Depression, the Scottish Recovery Indicator and the suicide prevention strategy Choose Life) as well as smaller scale projects. During my time with SDC I embarked upon an MSc in Social Research Methods through the Open University which I did part-time alongside my full-time job. Two years after starting with SDC I was promoted to Researcher.

After two years as Researcher it became clear that there were very few opportunities for development within SDC. However, it had given me significant experience of working with national and local government, the NHS, the private sector and charities and other third sector organisations, alongside the obvious research experience. In 2008 I started looking for other opportunities and applied for a few, some of which were unsuccessful. In summer 2018, I was offered two posts – Research Officer for the Scottish Refugee Council and Research Officer with SCRA. Whilst I would have loved to have worked with the refugee and asylum seeking population I ultimately turned this down and accepted the post at SCRA because it better fit with my experience in mental health and logistically it was easier to commute to.

Not long after I started with SCRA I completed my MSc. My time as Research Officer found me involved in a variety of research projects – from internal evaluations of the Victim Information Service and the use of Non-Disclosure, to larger studies of Childhood Sexual Exploitation, Secure Authorisations, Better Hearings and Education for Looked After Children as well as Scottish Government commissioned

studies on Permanence Planning, Age of Criminal Responsibility and the use of CSO's with conditions of residence at home – research which has brought policy and practice improvement. I have also supported SCRA's Modern Apprentices in their inspections of Hearings Centres which resulted in demonstrable change in Hearings facilities. My time with SCRA has brought opportunities to attend national conferences, strategic groups, present at national multi-agency forums and work with colleagues across the child protection sector which, being a real people person, I have thoroughly enjoyed.

In 2011 my twin boys were born and I made full use of SCRA's maternity leave entitlement. I returned to work part-time over three days. My manager was very flexible in regards to my working hours as my role didn't have an operational impact. Even before COVID-19 I worked from home regularly to have better work/life balance. I have found SCRA's terms and conditions to be very supportive when the children are unwell or have events I want to attend during working hours.

In the years following my return to work (and following prompting by my manager) I embarked upon the Diploma in Public Service Leadership offered by SCRA, obtaining the qualification in 2015. I found this course to be incredibly interesting, enabling me to gain insight and knowledge into leadership and management that I wouldn't have obtained through my day job. My manager suggested I join SCRA's Equalities Network in 2016 and I quickly took on the role of Gender and Gender Re-assignment Lead for SCRA, leading a team of Inclusion Ambassadors in driving forward the equality and inclusion agenda in relation to this protected characteristic.

*“I'm lucky as my manager has been great at pushing me and identifying opportunities for development within SCRA and has been supportive of my developing out with the organisation too. But I'm also able to identify and put myself forward for opportunities. If your manager doesn't enable your development it's important that you speak to them and/or seek out development opportunities.”*

In my role on the Equalities Network worked closely with the Inclusion & Diversity Manager in developing the strategic direction of the organisation. I sought out opportunities to work with other managers on a range of strategic outcome planning including; addressing the gender pay gap, supporting the mental health and well-being of our workforce, reviewing our HR policies in line with our equalities responsibilities and I volunteered to sit on the Equalities Review Group to provide quality assurance for SCRA's Equalities & Human Rights Impact Assessment's. It was the equalities work – which were additional responsibilities – that first enabled me to gain insight into other areas of SCRA's business and gain valuable skills and experience in leadership, planning and strategy development and change processes.

*“I think it's very important to look for opportunities outside your job description and outside your comfort zone because if you're not being challenged then you're not learning. My biggest development opportunities have not come from within my job role, but from the other opportunities I've sought...the additional roles and responsibilities I've taken on in SCRA have given my alternative experiences and opportunities. They've brought variety and given me the opportunity to work with the Board and the Executive Management Team, as well as with other members of staff across the business that I otherwise wouldn't have had.”*



It was, alongside my dedication and enthusiasm for inclusion, diversity and human rights, the additional responsibilities I took on that led me to where I find myself now – Inclusion & Diversity Manager. When the post became vacant in March 2020 I was aware that it – or a similar post – would have to be filled at some point. I spent the nine months following this enhancing my skills, knowledge and experience. I sought out and completed online courses. I familiarised myself with legislation, policy and practice. I became more involved in EHRIA's and made myself visible to senior management. This pro-active preparation, alongside my prior involvement with strategic planning, put me in a strong position when the vacant post was advertised in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and I successfully applied, taking up the post of Inclusion & Diversity Manager in December 2020. I won't lie, this has been incredibly daunting even though I'd been doing a lot of the strategic work already as I'd worked closely with my predecessor and she was so passionate and knowledgeable and I did feel that I could never live up to her standards – she left very big boots to fill! But as I've settled in I've grown in confidence and appreciate my strengths are different to hers and that's okay.

***“Don't compare yourself to others who do the job or who have done the job. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, focus on what you're good at and what you'll bring to the role. It's okay to do things differently. In fact, that's the good thing with bringing someone new into the role – new perspectives and new ideas.”***

Outside of work I also take every opportunity I can to learn and develop. I was keen to gain further understanding of the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda so in 2018 I sought out and completed an NCFE Level 2 Certificate in Equality & Diversity, again studying in my spare time.

***“It's important to keep learning and I've taken every opportunity I've had to enhance my skills and knowledge. I keep saying say I'm never going to study again but find myself getting restless after a couple of years and seeking out something else.”***

Development has not just come from my work and I've made use of SCRA's Volunteering Policy to develop out with SCRA. I am the Child Protection and Well-Being Officer for Crieff Juniors Football Club so sit on the Executive Committee and am responsible for all child protection and well-being issues for all teams within the club (from ages three to 17 years old). I am also an Independent Prison Monitor (IPM) for HMIPS at HMP & YOI Cornton Vale. The IPM role is essential within the Scottish justice system in ensuring prisoners' human rights are upheld and that life in prison contributes to rehabilitation; we provide an independent assessment on the humane treatment and conditions for prisoners and conduct investigations on their behalf. Being an IPM is incredibly rewarding and further develops my understanding of the criminal justice system and processes, the prison regime and human rights. I am always searching for volunteering opportunities that will further enhance my skills and experience to further develop my career, particularly in areas that aren't available in SCRA.

***“I'd emphasise how important voluntary work can be in developing your skills, knowledge and experience and there are some really amazing opportunities out there if you look for them.”***

Do I want to progress within SCRA? I'm not sure. I love the job I'm doing now and I can't imagine another that currently exists that would bring me as much satisfaction as this one does. It wasn't what I set out to do when I left university – or even five



years ago – but I now can't see myself working in any other field. My long-term plan is to work in human rights and promoting equality in developing countries or those impacted by conflict or natural disaster. My current role is a stepping stone to that and I will seek out every opportunity to develop my skills and experience so that when the time comes I will have the necessary experience. At the moment, my boys are still young and I can't leave them to work abroad permanently, but I am open to short-term development opportunities and in finding other ways to gain the experience I need and I plan to use annual leave to participate in short-term voluntary work overseas in developing countries tackling gender and socio-economic inequality. It is this forward-planning that's needed to progress in the direction you're passionate about.

*“Forward planning is really important if you have a goal in mind. Achieving your career goals doesn't just happen by accident, it happens by figuring out what it is you need to do to get there. It involves identifying opportunities, 'dressing for the job you want, not the job you have' (metaphorically speaking) and seeing where your gaps are and finding ways to fill them. Then, when the opportunity presents itself, you can put yourself forward with confidence knowing that you tick all the boxes.”*

I'm not driven by job titles, status or money but by job satisfaction, autonomy and making a positive impact. I am ambitious but not in the sense of 'climbing the ladder'. My ambition is about contributing to real change and that's what drives my career choices and how I ended up SCRA's Inclusion & Diversity Manager.

