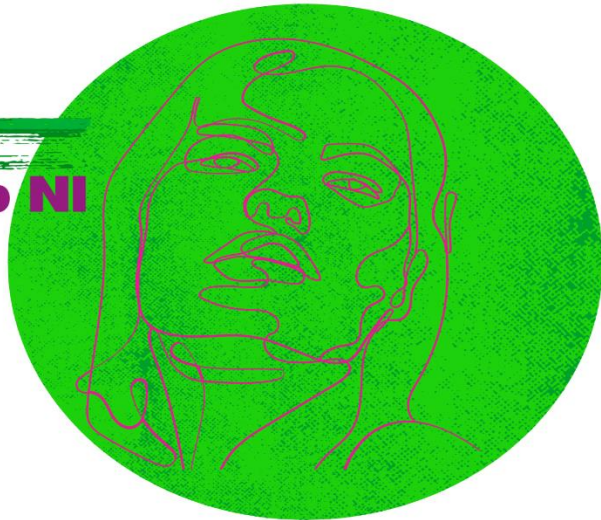


**Women's
Policy Group NI**

**COVID-19
FEMINIST
RECOVERY
PLAN
WEBINAR SERIES**



WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar 2: Covid-19 and the Impact on Rural Women

In celebration of Rural Women's Day 2020, the second Webinar in the Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series focused on 'Covid-19 and the Impact on Rural Women.' This Webinar took place in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and featured two speakers, including Louise Coyle from NIRWN and Fiona McCandless from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Issues faced by rural women are a key focus of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan (FRP). Although rural women make up roughly 40% of all women in Northern Ireland, they receive just 1.3% of all government funding for women. Issues that existed for rural women before Covid-19, such as access poverty, digital poverty, lack of sufficient public infrastructure and failure to consider the needs of rural women in policy making, have all been exacerbated due to the pandemic. This webinar highlighted the need for government to take an inter-departmental approach to tackling issues faced by rural women, and the need to restructure the Northern Ireland economy and public infrastructure, to move away from the Belfast-centric model we currently have, which disproportionately disadvantages those in rural areas.

The first speaker was Louise Coyle from NIRWN, who works with rural women on a daily basis and is a member of the Northern Ireland Women's Policy Group. Louise highlighted some of the key issues faced by women living in rural areas which existed before Covid-19 but were exacerbated in the context of the pandemic. For example, the lack of sufficient public transport in rural areas meant that rural women were further away from support services, making it harder to ensure delivery of supplies to those shielding, and harder to access health facilities such as hospitals. She highlighted some key problems that remain in terms of decision-making in Northern Ireland. Firstly, despite the fact that almost every policy area impacts on women, women are rarely taken into account when policy is being drafted. Secondly, 22 years later, women have not been adequately represented in peacebuilding efforts since the Good Friday Agreement (1998), despite government commitments to ensure this. Thirdly, women are still not equally represented in decision-

making roles across business, government and public sectors, which means women's ability to influence decision-making remains limited.

Budgets and resourcing were a key topic discussed by both speakers. Despite the fact that all funding is constrained, rural women in particular remain severely underfunded compared with other sections of the population. NIRWN is the only organisation in Europe focussed specifically on addressing the needs of rural women. Although this provides a unique opportunity for rural women living in Northern Ireland, its funding as an organisation has decreased in recent years. In 2020, NIRWN's funding was only 13% of what it was at its establishment in 2017. This highlights the essential need for all budgets, programmes for government and policy recovery plans to take rural women's needs into account, and allocate resources accordingly.

Fiona McCandless from DAERA responded to some of the issues raised by Louise, highlighting the importance of: including women in decision-making, encouraging employers to introduce flexible working/ job-sharing capacities to benefit women, particularly rural women, from retaining employment, and the need for budgeting to take into consideration the specific needs of rural women. Fiona also stressed the need for an inter-departmental approach to tackling these issues, as DAERA are constrained in their ability to deliver on these issues without support from other departments. In her new role as 'Gender Champion' of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Fiona emphasised her commitment to working with NIRWN and other women's organisations to promote the voices of women, and particularly rural women, in policy-making and departmental strategies.

The Webinar drew to a close with a hope-filled discussion of how we can improve the lives of rural women and create a more vibrant Northern Ireland by building on the recommendations regarding rural needs in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the voluntary and community sector jumped into action, providing support and care for local people and businesses. This strength and resilience echoed across Northern Ireland, but particularly in rural areas where community networks are incredibly strong. These vital networks are at the core of Northern Irish life, and are the foundations upon which our economy is built. In order to recognise this, voluntary and community work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and older people, needs to be valued to the same degree as private business, not just in Belfast but spread out across Northern Ireland. This means urgently increasing funding for rural women, and listening and taking into consideration the voices of rural women when drafting policy, budgets, and programmes for government. The FRP is an evidence-based report which details how this is achievable, and encourages all decision makers to take a gendered response to the current crisis in its recovery planning.