Women's Policy Group NI

COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

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Abstract

This feminist recovery plan will cover a wide range of evidence on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and the recommendations to address this from the WPG NI

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Women's Policy Group NI - COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Introduction

This paper has been created by the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland (WPG).

The WPG is a platform for women working in policy and advocacy roles in different organisations to share their work and speak with a collective voice on key issues. It is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBT+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals.

Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG represents all women of Northern Ireland and we use our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women.

The WPG is endorsed as a voice that represents all women of Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women. The WPG membership is broad and has a deep understanding of how best to approach the impact COVID-19 is having on women in Northern Ireland. The impact on all protected groups will be severe, and this paper will use evidence of the disproportionate impact the pandemic is having on women to make recommendations to policy-makers.

Please note, not all member organisations of the Women's Policy Group have specific policy positions on all the areas covered throughout this plan. Therefore, individual experts from each of the organisations below contributed to the sections that cover their own areas expertise.

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The content of this paper is supplemented by additional WPG COVID-19 research and the WPG Women's Manifesto 2019 which was written and supported by the following organisations:

Women's Resource and Development Agency
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
Transgender NI
Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee
Reclaim the Night Belfast
Committee on the Administration of Justice
Politics Plus
Belfast Feminist Network
HERe NI
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Reclaim the Agenda
Alliance for Choice
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
Women's Support Network
DemocraShe
Raise Your Voice

COVID-19 and Gender - Overview

We recognise that some issues highlighted will be of a devolved nature for the Northern Ireland Assembly, others will be issues that require Westminster intervention. This recovery plan will be based on all of the issues impacting women and specific policy recommendations will be made to both the Northern Ireland Assembly on devolved matters and to the UK Government on UK-wide issues.

It is essential that all levels of government representing Northern Ireland are fully aware of the unique challenges in Northern Ireland; particularly as the UK government is the duty bearer for human rights in NI. Women in Northern Ireland have suffered immensely due to a decade of Austerity, and any COVID-19 recovery can not come to the detriment of women's equality and economic well being.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge across the UK. It has put in sharp focus the value and importance of care work, paid and unpaid, and highlighted the essential nature of often precarious and almost always low paid retail work. Women undertake the majority of this work, and women will bear a particular brunt of this crisis; economically, socially and in terms of health. The WPG is calling on decision-makers across the UK to take action to ensure a gender-sensitive crisis response as we transition from crisis response to recovery.

The current crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis[1]. These inequalities, along with key solutions, were highlighted in a Women's Manifesto issued by the WPG in preparation for the general election in December 2019[2]. These solutions remain central for a long-term response, but the developing crisis has put a number of issues in sharp focus for urgent emergency action.

Not only does this crisis have a disproportionate impact on women, but that impact is worsened for women from particular backgrounds: for instance, black and racialised women, disabled women, women with caring responsibilities, and LGBT women. The emergency action required, and any recovery programme put in place, must meaningfully take into consideration the institutionalised inequalities that exist within Northern Ireland, and must co-develop a roadmap forward with the communities affected.

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[1] See Women's Resource and Development Agency Reports on Gender Inequality in NI in 2020 https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Gender-Inequality-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf; Brexit and the Impact on Women in NI https://wrda.net/2019/10/18/brexit-and-the-impact-on-women-in-northern-ireland/; Disabled Women and Discrimination https://wrda.net/2019/11/18/disabled-women-and-discrimination-facts-we-need-you-to-know/; Childcare: A Women's Issue https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-a-women-s-issue-by-rachel-powell-women-s-sector-lobbyist-at-wrda.

[2] Women's Policy Group NI Election Manifesto 2019: http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women%27sManifesto2019.pdf

Relevant WPG Research and Publications

The WPG and member organisations have already published several briefings, articles, evidence submissions and reports on the unequal impact COVID-19 is having on Women in Northern Ireland. This has included:

- WPG briefing for MLAs on COVID-19 and Gender
- WPG article on the impact of COVID-19 on Women
- WPG and WBG Joint Statement to DfC on Statutory Maternity Pay, Carer's Allowance and the Two-Child Cap
- WPG Submission to the Westminster Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry on the Impact of COVID-19 on People with Protected Characteristics
- WPG Domestic Violence and Family Proceedings Bill Evidence Submission and WRDA Domestic Violence and COVID-19 Briefing
- WPG Article on COVID-19 and Gender - NICVA Insights and Impact Series
- WPG Article on Human Rights Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Just News
- Childcare for All campaign statement on COVID-19 and Childcare
- Follow-Up Childcare for All campaign statement

In addition to COVID-19 research, the WPG and member organisations have also published several submissions on gender-equality related issues in the past two years including:

- WPG Hate Crime Legislation Northern Ireland Independent Review Consultation Response
- WPG UK Government Marriage Equality Consultations Response
- WRDA Response to Department of Finance Budget Engagement
- WPG Response to A New Legal Framework for Abortion Services in NI Consultation
- Women's Regional Consortium Report - Making Ends Meet - Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending
- Women's Regional Consortium Report - Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives
- Women's Regional Consortium Report - In Work Poverty
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network - Rural Voices Research Report
- WRDA Response to Consultation on Dormant Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland
- WRDA Report - Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?
- Equality Coalition Report - Sectarianism: The Key Facts
- Women's Regional Consortium Report: Brexit and the Impact on Women in Northern Ireland
- WRDA Report- Disabled Women and Discrimination
- Human Rights Consortium Report - Brexit: Rights at Risk
- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions Report: Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality
- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions Policy Document Report: Better Work Better Lives
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions: No Going Back, a New Deal for a Safe and Secure Future for All

- TUC Report - Forced Out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong
- Women's Sector Lobbyist Childcare for All Blog - Childcare: A Women's Issue
- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform - Northern Ireland civil society shadow report to CEDAW
- Amnesty International Report - Toxic Twitter
- Amnesty International with Women's Link Worldwide, International Planned Parenthood Federation: A Guide for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of COVID10 pandemic and its aftermath.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations:

This report will analyse the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Northern Ireland in terms of economic justice, health, social justice and cultural inequality. In addition to this, implications of Brexit and the need for a Bill of Rights will be examined and an analysis of international best practice case studies will be done. Based on the evidence outlined in the above areas, recommendations will be made for gender-responsive budgeting and policy-making to both the NI Assembly and UK governments. Throughout each pillar an area of analysis will be framed around the following questions:

A. How the government should find money to fund recommendations,
B. How jobs can be stimulated under each pillar,
C. What funding should, or shouldn't, be spent on,
D. What a better, more resilient and gender-equal society will look like.

This plan will use a mix of political and economic policy-making recommendations to advocate for a feminist recovery to COVID-19 with the aim of not only avoiding deepening gender inequalities through recovery planning, but also tackling the gendered inequalities that already exist in our society.

For a summary of our top-level policy recommendations for each Department, the NI Executive and the UK Government, please contact rachel.powell@wrda.net.

Cultural Pillar

4.1 Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture and Violence Against Women

Sexism and the sexist portrayal of women and girls in the media remains a serious issue.

Most visibly focused on women in public life, it impacts not just those women, but women and girls who are exposed to it. Research by Girlguiding UK shows that the single biggest reason listed by girls aged 11-16 that they are put off entering public life is because "women leaders are criticised more than male leaders", with the third largest percentage saying that "there is too much focus on how they look and not on what they do"[3]. This demonstrates clearly the impact that this kind of media coverage has; while the women directly named may have developed a "thick skin", the young women looking on will often exclude themselves for careers they would otherwise choose because of this scrutiny.

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media, that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise[4] and the damage that they can do known to medical professionals, this is something that needs to be strictly regulated for a number of different reasons.

Further, media can be especially critical when considering the intersectional identities that people have, with trans women and women of colour particularly impacted by intense media scrutiny. In recent years trans people - women and children in particular - have been the subject of a kind of "moral panic", particularly in the UK media. Some of the media rhetoric has focused on the supposed danger that these people pose to women and girls.

In addition to this, there are serious issues with the way the media report on sexual offences and on domestic abuse, violence and homicide. Many headlines, in particular, mislead the reader and can reinforce myths around sexual and intimate partner violence. There have been some successful strides made in persuading media outlets to accept that guidelines are needed in the reporting of domestic abuse and especially domestic homicide. Level Up campaigned to have guidelines accepted to prevent further trauma to victims and their families and to avoid sending the wrong message about the nature of intimate partner violence. While they were successful,

[3] Girlguiding, (2019), 'Girls attitudes survey', (available online): https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf
[4] See: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/15/hospital-admissions-for-eating-disorders-surge-to-highest-in-eight-years

there are still numerous instances of this occurring in the media and guidelines therefore need to be enforced more stringently.

Their suggested guidelines on reporting domestic homicide[5] were as follows:

1. Accountability: Place responsibility solely on the killer, which means avoiding speculative "reasons" or "triggers", or describing the murder as an uncharacteristic event. Homicides are usually underpinned by a longstanding sense of ownership, coercive control and possessive behaviours: they are not a random event.
2. Accuracy: Name the crime as domestic violence, instead of "tragedy" or "horror", and include the National Domestic Violence Helpline at the end of the piece.
3. Dignity: Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details that compromise the dignity of the dead woman or her surviving family members.
4. Equality: Avoid insensitive or trivialising language or images
5. Images: Avoid using stock images that reinforce the myth that it's only a physical crime.

Rape Myths and Rape Culture

As of mid June 2020, none of the recommendations contained in the Gillen Review that require legislation have been brought into place, and there are no published plans as yet to do so. Many of the changes recommended would be transformative for the experience of reporting rape or other serious sexual offences, and since the Gillen review was commissioned by the state there is an imperative to act upon its recommendations as soon as possible. **We urge action on this as soon as possible, and at least a timetable of the plans moving forward.**

One specific recommendation of the Gillen Review was a public awareness campaign, funded by the state, to tackle rape myths and to counter misinformation and confusion on the issue of consent. As more and more people come forward with complaints of sexual misconduct, it is apparent that we need this as urgently as ever. Public awareness can also begin in formal educational institutions, specifically schools and third level organisations, and such a programme must deal with issues around consent and boundaries, in an age appropriate manner, without fudging the issue. Sex and relationships education is, at present, dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not deal with these issues head on. In addition they are sometimes entirely heteronormative, not covering LGBTQ+ relationships at all, and therefore not providing the necessary skills to an especially vulnerable demographic.

[5] https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/domestic-abuse-reporting-guidelines-ipso-press-regulation-a8871996.html

With regards to rape myths, Raise Your Voice has submitted evidence to IPSO on guidelines for the reporting of sexual violence. In it, they argue that there are many myths about rape and there will be more as society and technology evolve. Recently in the UK a Judge was widely criticised for espousing, from the bench, the view that a husband cannot rape his wife, despite the law on marital rape changing in 1991, and the person in question being trained on the law.

The real danger of rape myths is their persistence. The above case shows how pernicious they can be, and research also shows that these myths pass down through generations, with college-aged men likely to espouse them when their father does, too[6]. A recent YouGov survey in the UK showed a similar trend among Britons, with a quarter of those 4,000 surveyed believing that marital rape does not exist[7] and many more expressing confusion regarding whether rape can occur where there is no violence.

In the Gillen Review, commissioned to research and publish recommendations for the conduct of trials into serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. The resulting Report contains over 200 recommendations that are wide-ranging and overwhelmingly welcomed by the women's movement in Northern Ireland. One of his key recommendations is Recommendation Number 18: "That the press and media should be party to a voluntary protocol governing how serious sexual offences are reported." This is especially true when reporting on rape myths[8]. Gillen writes:

> *"Rape myths are a trial reality and can often form the basis of aggressive cross-examination and may attract the unreasonable thinking of jurors. Moreover, for all kinds of societal reasons, complainants often buy into these myths, blaming themselves. I regard them as potentially a major challenge to the concept of a fair trial."*

If these myths are a barrier to a trial, when the jurors are in receipt of careful legal instruction, they are certainly a barrier to tackling sexual violence in society as a whole.

Raise Your Voice made the following recommendations which the WPG endorse:

- Guidance must require reports to specify who they are quoting when quotations are used, particularly when they are quoting defence teams' characterisation of a complainant or complainant's behaviour.

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6 https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jessica_Turchik/publication/226563223_Rape_Myths_History_Individual_and_Institutional-Level_Presence_and_Implications_for_Change/links/0912f513cecb164264000000/Rape-Myths-History-Individual-and-Institutional-Level-Presence-and-Implications-for-Change.pdf

7 https://www.theweek.co.uk/98330/when-did-marital-rape-become-a-crime

8 https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/gillen-review-report-law-and-procedures-serious-sexual-offences-ni

- Guidance should encourage fact-based headlines, because merely using quotation marks around words does not necessarily convey to the reader that this is a person's opinion or a defence's argument.
- Guidance that encourages the centring of victims, particularly after a guilty verdict, as opposed to centring the wasted potential or the tribulations of the convicted sex offender.
- Guidelines requiring the clear identification of rape myths as rape myths, for example when a defence lawyer says "why didn't she shout or fight", a responsible publication will follow that reporting with the proviso that in fact that most rape victims do not shout or fight.
- The detailed reporting of the very few cases where somebody has been falsely accused of rape or sexual assault should always be balanced by accounting for how rare these cases actually are. Failure to do so fuels a dangerous and common myth that these kinds of false accusations are common.
- Endeavour to make clear the difference between a failure to prosecute or a failure to convict and a proven false accusation.
- In the case of online content, publications should actively and adequately monitor comments or close comment sections entirely. Publications have a responsibility with regards to the spreading of misinformation and the potential damage to the public as well as to the complainant in any given case.
- When reporting on sexual crimes and especially serious sexual crimes, helplines and helpful websites for victims and survivors should be included at the end of the piece.

Further WPG recommendations to tackle rape culture include:

- Beginning a public awareness campaign as soon as possible and ensuring that funds are identified and ring fenced in order to make sure that this happens without delay.
- In the interim a timetable for implementing the Gillen Review recommendations must be published.
- We also recommend that a comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and 3rd level institutions.
- Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.
- Ensure that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates.
- Ensure that Violence Against Women and Girls is being reported in a responsible manner across media platforms so as to discourage victim blaming and rape myths as laid out in article 17 of the Istanbul Convention.
- Address issues with reporting gender based violence and threats to eradicate practices of victim-blaming, perpetuating myths and suggestions that women's behaviour should change. Have gender based violence, threats and abuse included as a protected characteristic in any upcoming Hate Crime Legislation Review in Northern Ireland.

Violence Against Women

The Women's Policy Group recently submitted evidence to the Justice Committee relating to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. The WPG NI welcomes the proposed legislative changes regarding domestic abuse and violence both within the Northern Ireland Assembly and in Westminster Parliament. Activists, women's organisations and support providers have spent many years calling for adequate domestic abuse legislation in Northern Ireland. In the current global pandemic, domestic abuse and violence has sharply increased as many are put at greater risk due to the ongoing government-issued social distancing and lockdown measures. Creating adequate domestic abuse and violence legislation could not be more pertinent than it is right now. Whilst the quick action to introduce Northern Ireland-specific legislation is to be welcomed, this legislation is now over three years old and it is essential that we learn from the lessons in other jurisdictions and ensure that the women's sector are included in the application and implementation of relevant legislation moving forward.

Our full evidence submission, with detailed recommendations relating to the content of the bill, and most significantly, what is missing, can be read here. A summary includes:

Recommendations:

- Remove the 'reasonable defence' clause 12
- Introduction of Stalking legislation
- Introduction of non-fatal and fatal strangulation legislation
- Recognition of Violence against Women and Girls and gender-based violence in line with the Istanbul Convention
- Grant of Secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women etc.
- Review of the court systems in NI including criminal, civil and family courts
- Introduce a Domestic Abuse Commissioner for Northern Ireland (already in post for England and Wales)
- Secure funding for specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services
- Provide guidelines to employers on recognising the signs of abusive behaviour
- Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse
- Tackle heteronormative assumptions and increase awareness of domestic violence within the context of LGBT+ people
- Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.,
- Powers to deal with domestic abuse:
    - Introduction of domestic abuse protection order
    - Introduction of domestic abuse protection notices

- Safer family court and child contact system
- Improve child safety through:
    - Prohibiting unsupervised child contact for a parent on bail for domestic violence and abuse, or where there are ongoing criminal proceedings.
    - Child contact in cases of domestic abuse is based on an informed judgement on what is in the best interests of children, not the presumption of parental involvement.
    - An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:
    - Use of the Domestic Violence register showing the number of times police have been called to the house, to build a picture of the frequency and nature of abuse (in line with CEDAW Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence),
    - Use of PSNI intelligence and evidence gathered from incidents to build a picture of coercive control as a course of conduct,
    - Use of body worn camera evidence from the scene on each occasion to effectively demonstrate the impact and seriousness of abuse. In parts of England where body worn cameras have been rolled out, there is a marked increase in the severity of sentences for domestic violence related crimes.
- NI has not fully implemented an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service nine years after it's recommendation; any service should be specialised and not gender-neutral and consideration should be give to the introduction of children's IDVAs and making IDVAs mandatory in police stations
- Ensure there is effective reporting and monitoring of all section 75 groups by the PSNI to ensure the diverse needs of victims from various minority groups can be met
- Addressing re-offending – highlighting the lack of a framework of prevention, rehabilitation and restorative justice in NI
- Guidelines for sentencing for coercive control
- Guidelines for measuring non-physical harm
- Ensure victims' statements cannot be weaponised by prosecutors
- Provide guarantees that women with uncertain immigration status can seek justice without their cases being reported to the Home Office
- Create an inter-departmental approach for the implementation and creation of other legislation with the collaboration of the third sector

4.2 Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

Hate Crimes

With an ongoing Hate Crime Legislation Review happening in Northern Ireland, it is vital that elected representatives take rapid action to create updated legislation to address the growing crisis of increased hate crimes and online abuse towards minority groups. Tackling hate crime should be an immediate priority for the Executive moving forward out of COVID-19. The Women's Policy Group submitted a detailed Hate Crime Legislation Review consultation response which you can read here.

In particular, we are calling for misogyny and transphobia to be added as hate crime characteristics; legislation that accounts for intersecting identities; for consideration to be given to the recognition of sex workers as protected characteristic through consultation with sex workers groups; for recognition of the harm caused by online abuse towards women; a full review of outdated and absent legislation in Northern Ireland relating to hate crime and more mass investment into training and education throughout the judicial system and society as a whole.

A summary of our recommendations include:

- Introduce of an adequate working definition of hate crime,
- Create a consolidated hate crime legislation model for Northern Ireland,
- Replacing the enhanced sentencing model with the statutory aggravation model,
- Apply the statutory aggravation model to all protected characteristics,
- Introduce specific guidelines and extensive programmes of training and education on any new model of hate crime legislation; including what the protected characteristics are and the consequences of committing a hate crime,
- Recognising gender as a protected characteristic through specifically treating misogyny as a standalone hate crime,
- Recognise transgender identity a protected characteristic,
- Recognise intersex identity as a protected characteristic,
- Consider recognising sex workers as a protected characteristic,
- Create a legal framework that recognises the importance of intersectionality to adequately reflect the experiences and identities of victims and motivations of perpetrators,
- Require the court to state if offences are aggravated, reflect this on court records and outline the difference the aggravation had on sentencing,
- Record aggravated offences on criminal justice records,
- Introduce a "by reason of" threshold,
- Create a statutory legal definition of "hostility",

- Add equivalent provisions to Sections 4, 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987,
- Remove "dwelling" defences,
- Include all protected groups under the stirring up provisions of the Public Order (NI) Order 1987,
- Recognise the severe harm caused by online hate speech against women,
- Update and amend existing legislation dealing with public order, malicious communications and harassment to reflect the changing nature of communications due to social media,
- Ensure online harm is fully covered within hate crime legislation,
- Strengthen law relating to public authorities tackling hate expressions in public spaces,
- Implement victim-led restorative justice programmes in collaboration with community-based organisations,
- Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme,
- Restrict the press reporting of hate crime victims where appropriate,
- Create measures for legislative consolidations and scrutiny.

Online Abuse Against Women

There have been 1,220 reports of online violence towards women in Northern Ireland since 2015 (the total could be even higher than the figures suggest as not all crimes specified the gender of the victim). In 2017-18 the PSNI saw the highest annual figure ever recorded with 433 women feeling so threatened they reported to the police – 30 of these involved death threats with another 394 constituting harassment[9].

The issue of online abuse against women is extremely concerning. It has prompted the creator of the internet, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, to say that "the web is not working for women and girls.[10]" Berners-Lee stated that while the world has made important progress on gender equality he is "seriously concerned that online harms facing women and girls – especially those of colour, from LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups – threaten that progress." Berners-Lee said that "for many who are online, the web is simply not safe enough" and that online abuse:

> *"forces women out of jobs and causes girls to skip school, it damages relationships and leads to tremendous distress. Relentless harassment silences women and deprives the world of their opinions and ideas, with female journalists and politicians pushed off social media and bullied out of office."*

[9] ITV News (2018), 'Reports of Online Violence Towards Women in NI', (available online): https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2018-12-18/1-220-reports-of-online-violence-towards-women-in-ni/ [accessed 29/06/20.

[10] Why the web needs to work for women and girls, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, March 2020 https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/web-birthday-31/

In 2018 Amnesty International published research on 'Toxic Twitter'[11] which included interviews with journalists, activists and politicians from the UK (including NI) and USA exposing how Twitter is failing to respect women's rights, and warned the social media company that it must take concrete steps to improve how it identifies, addresses and prevents violence and abuse against women on the platform.

The women's testimony details the shocking nature of violence and abuse they are receiving on Twitter, including death threats, rape threats and racist, transphobic and homophobic abuse. Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets, but people who aren't in the public eye are also experiencing abuse, especially if they speak out about issues like sexism and use campaign hashtags. Several recommendations were made and can be viewed here.

In the independent review of hate crime in Northern Ireland, Judge Marrinan acknowledged the issue of hateful abuse online as part of this Review citing the abuse that many women politicians both in Westminster and locally in the Northern Ireland Assembly have to endure often on a daily basis.

This is a significant issue as it has led to the resignation of a number of women MPs in recent years with obvious impacts for gender equality and ensuring that the voices of women are at the table. Heidi Allen stood down because of the "nastiness and intimidation" she faced as a politician. Luciana Berger said the abuse she faced made her "physically ill" so much so that she had to work with the police and security for her personal safety. She described the abuse as "personal and sometimes very extreme in its nature. Sometimes it's pornographic, sometimes violent, often very misogynistic."

Online abuse of some of Northern Ireland's female politicians has prompted calls to establish a cross-party working group on misogyny. Cara Hunter, SDLP MLA and Deputy Mayor of Derry has been subjected to near-constant "sexual and violent messages and threatening voicemails." DUP MLA Carla Lockhart said that online abuse was something she had become accustomed to. She explained "any time there's a picture of me on Twitter, no matter what it's connected with, I will have someone picking on my appearance."

There is a real need for action to prevent these online behaviours. It is important to have the best people involved in Government representing their communities. It is not possible to achieve this if women feel excluded from these positions due to this type of misogyny and online hate. Women make up half the population and their rights and interests cannot be adequately protected unless women are involved in positions of power and in Government. Misogynistic behaviour of this kind limits women's representation and visibility not just in politics but in other spheres and it is therefore vital that this is tackled.

Online abuse against women and girls has specific implications, and often has a specific ferocity and disproportionate volume, for racialised women, LGBT+ women, and disabled women. In a

[11] Amnesty International, (2018), 'Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women': https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/

wider UK context, the MP who received the most online abuse during the 2017 election was Diane Abbott[12], the first black woman to be elected MP. Further, online abuse against trans women and girls has skyrocketed in the past number of years, fuelled by animosity in the media, lack of political support, and lack of accountability for multinational social media companies.

The Independent Hate Crime Legislation Review provides an important opportunity for action to be taken on this issue. We have made several recommendations in the WPG consultation response which can be read here.

4.3 Education and Training

Equality and Diversity Education

It is evident from the shocking statistics that vulnerable groups in our society have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. This is true both within Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. People living in low income areas, those with disabilities, older people, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds are all at increased risk of suffering serious illness and death as a result of Covid-19. The pandemic has harshly exposed pre-existing structural divisions and shown the consequences of failing to create a truly equal society. Depending on what happens next, including future government policy, we may be at risk of inequalities deepening even further. As life begins to return to relative normality and children return to school, it is more important than ever before that they receive adequate teaching on equality and diversity.

At present, rather than these themes being integrated across the curriculum, equality and diversity tend only to be focused on particular areas of learning (at primary level) and subjects (at secondary level). Primary school pupils are taught about equality and diversity as one element of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), but how much time is spent on this will vary. Within secondary schools, it can be even more difficult for teachers to find space to look at these themes because of the focus on academic attainment, though subjects such as Religious Education, History, and English Literature are a more common home for them than Mathematics and Science. Furthermore, teaching on diversity can sometimes become narrowly focused on the traditional sectarian divisions within NI, ignoring other complexities and obscuring the wider picture.

This has specific implications for racialised people in school, where racist bullying may not be handled effectively due to lack of training. It also has implications for LGBT pupils, who are at higher risk of being bullied while also facing institutional barriers to expressing themselves and

[12] Amnesty Insights (2017), 'Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs': https://medium.com/@AmnestyInsights/unsocial-media-tracking-twitter-abuse-against-women-mps-fc28aeca498a

being who they are safely in an educational environment. Further training and education, for staff and students, would create a safer and more accepting environment for currently marginalised and often disenfranchised pupils. It would also build the foundations for an education system based in safety for all, centred on care, and focused on preparing our children to be tolerant and well-rounded members of society.

Effective teaching of equality and diversity often relies on there being committed teachers within schools who are willing to look for opportunities to explore these themes fully. Sometimes this involves signing up for optional initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning that have a focus on these areas, bringing in appropriate guest speakers and working directly with communities and civil society to improve learning in these areas. Not all schools will believe they have the time and resources to do this, while others will. This leads to a variation in the quality of equality and diversity education across the NI school system, which fails pupils.

Currently, schools are not subject to the requirements within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, nor the Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. There is a significant gap in equality legislation and rights protections across the board in Northern Ireland: nowhere is that more apparent than in our schools.

Current international guidelines for education encourage a focus on diversity and equality. For instance, one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) states:

> *"By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."*

It is also worth noting that the NI Curriculum used in schools today was first introduced in 2007. So much has changed since then, particularly in the last few months, that an overhaul could be very beneficial to students.

Recommendations:

- An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- While distance learning has to continue, materials should be made accessible to all students so inequalities do not further widen. Opportunities for teaching about equality and diversity through these materials should be considered, particularly when new content is being developed / used.
- Initial teacher training - and subsequent CPD opportunities - should place a greater emphasis on equality and diversity. The teacher competency framework for initial teacher education (ITE) should cover both how to teach about these themes effectively within the

classroom and how to meet pupils' diverse social and educational needs. The latter should include consideration of a wide range of factors that may inhibit children's learning i.e. not just disability, but also covering sexuality or gender identity, etc. Anti-bias training should also be considered.

- Likewise, Principals and senior school managers should, as standard, receive training examining equality and diversity, including the underpinning legislation.
- The Department of Education (DoE) should adequately resource the codevelopment of equality and diversity workshops, for staff and pupils, with community organisations working with racialised, LGBT+, disabled, and migrant communities.
- Regular guidance should be issued to schools by the DoE on equality and diversity.
- Indicators should be introduced into the inspection process that look specifically at how schools are addressing equality and diversity.
- Furthermore, DoE should prioritise measures on equality and diversity explicitly in the processes of school improvement.
- Section 75 requirements and the Sex Discrimination Regulations should be applied to schools, alongside other relevant equality legislation
- Any relevant recommendations on education from international treaty bodies, such as CEDAW, should be adhered to.

Women's Access to Education and Training

The extent to which women more generally feel prepared to participate in education and training depends on a number of factors including childcare, transport and cost. Women's organisations offer community education which attempts to address these barriers particularly for women from disadvantaged and rural areas. The drive behind the introduction of Welfare Reform was to get more people into work. Women need access to education and training to make the move from benefits to work, yet the Government is not supporting this.

COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the lives of women, as schools closed and many women faced having to balance home-schooling, childcare, work from home and their own educational needs. The information on the unequal distribution of care and gender equality gaps that remain in the UK highlight the urgent need to prioritise women's access to education and training; particularly as many will have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 or may risk future job losses due to automation with any technological revolution. Intersectional policy-making is needed to address issues such as the digital divide, issues for women from migrant backgrounds struggling with language barriers in supporting children with homeschooling, rural access poverty, limited support for parents with disabled children and more is needed.

Recommendations:

- Provide support to women impacted by welfare reform, past austerity and COVID-19 to enable them to be work ready through the provision of supported community-based education and training.
- Establish a fund to address the disproportionate cuts to the women's sector community adult education.
- Create targets for apprenticeships to ensure a gender balance.
- Urgently address digital poverty and the impact of educational needs of families across all of Northern Ireland; including access to free internet and technology.
- Abide by CEDAW recommendations to:
    - Strengthen efforts to encourage girls to pursue non-traditional subjects and take coordinated measures to encourage girls to take up courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics;
    - Continue to implement the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee contained in the report of October 2018 on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places;
    - Take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, throughout the UK;
    - Ensure there are adequate educational campaigns related to any hate crime legislation review, domestic abuse legislation and all other legislative changes;
    - Promote human rights education in schools which includes a focus on the empowerment of girls and the Convention.

For questions or queries regarding the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency, rachel.powell@wrda.net