



WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar on Poverty, Austerity, Universal Credit and the Impact on Women.

As highlighted in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan (2020), the pandemic has had a disproportionate and serious impact on the economic, social, and physical wellbeing of women in Northern Ireland. This first event, in a series of Webinars on the Feminist Recovery Plan, focussed on its economic pillar; specifically, issues around poverty, austerity, and Universal Credit. The Webinar featured a range of speakers, from varying professional backgrounds, who gave helpful insights into these issues, and provided important context as to how they directly impact women living in Northern Ireland

The first speaker was Siobhán Harding from the Women's Support Network, who shed light on the experiences of women in accessing Universal Credit. Siobhán rightly set the experiences of women during the pandemic in the context of the economic landscape since the financial crash. As research shows, women were disproportionately impacted by the decade of austerity that followed the crash. Similarly, in the context of the pandemic, women have been more likely to lose their jobs, be claimants of benefits, and ultimately, more likely to experience poverty. Women make up the majority of Universal Credit claimants, a figure which rose by 80% between 1st March and 26th April 2020 due to the pandemic. Siobhán raised some of the key issues with the current Universal Credit system; namely, the 5-week wait, the 2-child limit, and the single payment system, all of which impact women disproportionately to men. This highlights the gendered nature of the issue and illustrates why any government strategy regarding changes to welfare, must recognise it as such, if women, particularly the most vulnerable women, are to be protected.

The second speaker was Kerry Logan from Housing Rights NI and Cliff Edge Coalition, who highlighted issues regarding loopholes which exist within the benefits system in Northern

Ireland. For example, Kerry spoke about loopholes in the existing mitigation legislation, the bedroom tax, and the benefit cap. As a result of issues arising from these loopholes, families in Northern Ireland have seen their benefits be reduced so significantly that a number of them have become impoverished, some falling 68% under the poverty line. As also mentioned by Siobhán Harding, these issues disproportionately affect women, as women are more likely to be lone parents, the primary recipients of child tax credits, and the primary providers of childcare.

The final speaker was Rachel Jeffers, from Law Centre NI (LCNI) and CliffEdge Coalition, who shared some concrete examples of how these issues around Poverty, Austerity and Universal Credit, impact women in their day-to-day lives. Rachel works with clients who are having difficulties with accessing benefits, and provides legal advice and assistance to these clients. In practice, this has meant attempting to navigate a system, such as Universal Credit, which was not built with women in mind, and is laden with technical and administrative challenges which have disproportionately negatively impacted women, as welfare recipients. For example, after an initial 9-month grace period, recipients of benefits can see deductions of up to £1000 per month, due to the benefits cap, which for a lone parent with 6 children can mean living on just £160 per week once this grace period has ended.

This first Webinar was a wonderful start to the series of upcoming events around the Feminist Recovery Plan, and provided an informative, engaging and multi-faceted discussion on the ways in which women have disproportionately been economically impacted by the pandemic. The next Webinar will take place on 15th October between 1-2pm and will cover issues faced by Rural Women in the context of the pandemic.