



### **WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar on Global Social Justice and Covid-19**

The third event in the Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series saw speakers from across the world come together to discuss issues of global social justice in the context of Covid-19. The Webinar was characterised by thoughtful discussions, meaningful debate, and shared perspectives on the importance of taking a gendered approach to responding to the current crisis. One of the take-home messages from this event was that women's participation is crucial in developing solutions to the crisis, on both a local and global level, particularly in the context of women living in conflict or post-conflict societies.

The first speaker was Avila Kilmurray, who has been a prominent figure in Northern Ireland (NI) and the women's movement since the 1970s. Drawing on her experiences during the NI Troubles, Avila highlighted the inspirational ability of women to come together on issues that unite them during times of hardship. Beneath the community tensions, issues such as poverty, employment and housing, were faced by women on both sides of the divide, issues that have become even more pronounced now in the context of Covid-19. She also spoke about the importance of modelling community or political organisations in a way that all people in NI can see themselves represented, in order to build connections and relationships across all of society. In this way, shared perspectives can act as a powerful catalyst for change and disrupt the institutionalised structures that act as barriers to women in NI society.

The second speaker was Elaine Croy, the Good Relations Co-ordinator at the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA). Elaine highlighted the importance of recognising the influence of previous women's movements and building on this today, by listening to women on the ground about their experiences and using this information to impact change. Elaine emphasised that the women she works with on a daily basis from local community centres and women's organisations are experts as a result of their experience, and should be treated as such by policy makers in NI. In the context of Covid-19, Elaine stressed that the issues faced by women now are the same issues that existed before Covid-19, but just in sharpened focus. Elaine covered issues such as paramilitarism, lack of effective policy

change, poverty, mental health issues, and lack of opportunities, all of which are highlighted in the Feminist Recovery Plan and which should be addressed by NI policy makers as a matter of urgency.

The third speaker was Noma Mosiko-Mpaka, a feminist peace advocate currently working for the Embassy of Ireland in South Africa. Noma emphasised Elaine's point that many of the economic, social and structural issues that existed before Covid-19 have now been brought into sharpened focus, in the context of South Africa. Namely, issues such as racial tensions, gender-based violence, unemployment and poverty, which all disproportionately affect women, and which need to be addressed with a gendered policy approach. Noma drew comparisons between the South African and Northern Ireland contexts, in how elected officials have dealt with Covid-19; failing to take gendered considerations into account and dismissing women's voices in the process. Similarly, to points raised by Avila and Elaine, Noma stressed the importance of women's participation in all areas of decision making; something which has become more important now, in the wake of Covid-19, than ever. In a discussion around UNSCR 1325 and the importance of developing National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement the Resolution, Noma raised the point that this should be as much an issue for countries in conflict as it is for post-conflict states, including Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland currently does not have a NAP, as the UK does not recognise the NI Troubles as a 'conflict' which means it does not fall under UNSCR 1325 remit.

The fourth speaker was Ruth Ojiambo, Executive Director of the Isis Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange in Uganda. Ruth's focus was on women impacted by conflict in society, something which is extremely prevalent in the context of Uganda. As a result of conflict, women experience high levels of displacement, sexual exploitation, poverty and violence. During the pandemic, the lockdown in Uganda contributed to rapidly increasing rates of sexual and domestic violence against women and girls. As we have seen in the UK, the Covid-19 crisis has been characterised by politicians and in the media as another battle we must fight; a masculine, militarised model of understanding. As Ruth pointed out, women and girls in Uganda and across the world are all too familiar with 'battle', and instead are calling for a gendered response to the crisis, that does not exacerbate further pre-existing inequalities, as conflict situations often do.

The final speaker was Ambika Satkunanathan, a Commissioner from the Human Rights Commission for Sri Lanka. Ambika raised important concerns about the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka, post-November 2019, and the increasing militarisation and influence of religious groups in society. She highlighted how this has led to the exacerbation of social and economic issues such as poverty and digital divide, as a result of the failure of government to provide sufficient and effective social protection services. As we have seen in Northern Ireland, with the switch from in-person to online methods of interaction, many families in Sri Lanka without access to technology due to financial restrictions are being left behind. Also, Muslims have increasingly been targeted as scapegoats for the spread of Covid-19, another issue we have seen in the UK, which has led to an increase in tensions between communities. In addition to this, the increasing militarisation and expansion of Executive powers has led to the repression of rights, such as the freedom of expression and association.

Ambika referenced the persisting patriarchal structures that exist in society, which allow gender inequalities to remain imbedded in social, economic and political life. These structures are not conducive to women's political participation, and prevent women from being involved in key decision making.

The Q&A section that followed was extremely informative, constructive and inspiring. In all areas discussed, such as South Africa, Uganda, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, it was clear that a failure to deal with the past continues to impact the lives of all in society, but particularly women, in a wide range of ways. Importantly, all speakers pointed to how crucial it was that we continue to collect gender segregated data and document the challenges we are currently facing, if we are to learn from this and better prepare for any crises that may come in the future. The Webinar drew important comparisons between different local contexts in an analysis of global social justice.