



WRDA Stormont and Westminster Update – Oct-Nov 2020

Summary

In the period 1st October – 19th November 2020, there have been a number of political developments surrounding three key themes as highlighted within the [Women's Policy Group COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#). One of the core areas that has witnessed development in NI is around domestic violence legislation and support services. In Westminster, we witnessed similar developments, however, there have been additional developments in support for women's employment and women's health services, mainly abortion access.

Domestic Violence has been a prominent agenda point in both the Northern Ireland Assembly and Westminster governments. Developments in relation to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill in Northern Ireland have been particularly significant. The bill, as well as increased resources to Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, aims to address the exacerbated issue of domestic violence in NI post-COVID-19. In real-world terms, the aim is to provide a comprehensive system whereby women and families who experience domestic violence have legal and practical support to escape the situation in addition to receiving justice.

In **Employment**, there have been a range of political developments. Most notably, those in Westminster aiming to tackle the negative effect of COVID-19 on women's engagement in the workplace. Additionally, childcare provisions and the Equal Pay Legislation debates both focus on more specific barriers to women's labour force participation. These developments affect women's lives as they aim to mitigate barriers to women's employment. This challenges the gender pay gap and the disproportionate economic effect on women through COVID-19. This will hopefully further economic stability for women and diminish economic marginalisation through encouraging labour force participation and equality within the workforce.

In terms of women's **Health**, the most significant development seen here is the introduction a bill to legislate within Great Britain for buffer zones around abortion clinics. This would hinder harassment and intimidation faced by women and eliminate this as a barrier to accessing services.

Stormont

Bills- introduced during period October- November 2020

Issue	Proposed by	Stage (as of 9 th Nov)	Comments	Links to the feminist recovery plan
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill	Naomi Long- Minister for Justice	Consideration stage	<p>The Bill creates a course of conduct offence and sentencing aggravation concerning domestic abuse. It makes rules as to procedure for giving evidence in criminal cases involving domestic abuse; and prevents cross-examination in person of certain witnesses in family proceedings in the civil courts.</p> <p>In her speech announcing the second stage for the bill, Naomi Long reflected the increased urgency of the bill due to COVID-19. She said that while people were being advised to stay at home during the pandemic, for those experiencing domestic abuse, this constitutes being trapped in abusive environments.</p> <p>There is a commitment to overseeing a long-term approach to tackling domestic abuse. It is reflected that the executive as partnering with public sector organisations to tackle the issue and encourages victims to avail of the services offered.</p> <p>It is reflected that a previous piece of consultation, reflected new legislation needed to reflect the nature of the crime. Particularly highlighting offences as being repetitive instances of abuse and perpetrators often using coercive and controlling behaviour. The proposal neglects to include any provision for a domestic abuse commissioner.</p>	<p>Incidences of domestic abuse have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>There was already insufficient support for women and families suffering domestic abuse, therefore the creation of the bill offers provisions etc. in order to address the issue.</p> <p>Recommendations from the WPG in relation to the bill can be viewed in Pillar 4 of the Feminist Recovery Plan.</p> <p>The WPG evidence submission to the Justice Committee can be viewed here.</p> <p>The WPG are particularly disappointed that the Bill does not include a provision</p>

			<p>At the consideration stage, a number of amendments have been debated. WRDA supported amendments were past. These amendments include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Amendment 7, which focuses on the adverse effect of domestic abuse on children -Amendment 14, which focuses on addressing accessibility to legal aid in domestic abuse related legal cases -Amendment 24, to mandate the department of justice to report on the implementation of the bill. <p>The Bill will reach Further Consideration Stage in a few weeks and more updates are likely to follow.</p>	<p>to create a Domestic Abuse Commissioner or a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.</p> <p>The WPG urged MLAs to support the following amendments:</p> <p>4, 7, 13, 14, 19, 24, 25, 27 and 28.</p> <p>All amendments and progress on the bill can be viewed here.</p>
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Non-Executive Bills

Issue	Proposed by	Stage (as of 9 th Nov)	Comments	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Zero Hour Contracts	Jemma Dolan MLA	Consultation period	The Bill aims to effectively ban zero-hour contracts.	Previous research reflects women make up the majority of workers within insecure and low paid employment. Therefore, as a group are particularly vulnerable to the pitfalls of zero-hour contracts.

				Link to the consultation survey and more information.
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Questions asked- tabled during period October- November 2020

Issue	Date	Asked by:	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Social media harassment of elected representatives	6/10/20	Mr Roy Beggs (UUP - East Antrim) To Naomi Long, Minister for Justice	<p>The question: <i>To ask the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with her UK counterparts to consider the need for changes to legislation to address malicious social media harassment of journalists, politicians, and members of the public.</i></p> <p>Long responded that she had been in communications with the Home Secretary to highlight the concern this issue raises within NI, particularly the use of anonymous account to harass and intimidate both elected reps and justice partners.</p>	<p>This is a particular issue amongst elected representatives who are women as data shows they are disproportionately affected. The abuse they do receive also commonly gendered and is a barrier to female descriptive representation within all levels of government.</p> <p>Recommendations on tackling harassment of women online can be read under pillar 4 of the Feminist Recovery Plan.</p> <p>Full statement from Long in response to the question can be read here.</p>

<p>Measures to be put in place to support the 17 victims of sexual offences recently informed by the Public Prosecution Service that their assailants' convictions are to be set aside as a result of a legislative error.</p>	<p>6/10/20</p>	<p>Ms Linda Dillon (SF - Mid Ulster) To Naomi Long, minister for Justice</p>	<p>The question: <i>To ask what measures will be put in place to support the 17 victims of sexual offences recently informed by the Public Prosecution Service that their assailants' convictions are to be set aside as a result of a legislative error.</i></p> <p>Long first apologised to the victims for the additional trauma incurred by the lack of convictions in these cases. There have been regular meetings with the Public Prosecution service to determine what went wrong, a senior lawyer within the department will now develop a quality-assurance check mechanism and a joint system of review between PPS and DOJ will be formed. She committed to focusing on future victims of crimes like this would have resources to cope with aftermath of the crime and to robustly evaluate the current system of prosecutions. She reflects this situation as being due to a unique human error, however, commits to work with PPS to review the changes in legislation and make sure it is not repeated. She also emphasises the role of the committee in analysing legislation and scrutinising actions going forward. Additionally, Long also assured Ministers that the assailants would not be able to claim compensation for their convictions, none of the victims would be liable for compensation.</p>	<p>The lack of conviction within cases of sexual offences consolidate a culture whereby victims, often women, don't feel as though the justice system supports them and therefore, they choose not to report when crimes occur.</p> <p>Currently, the prosecution rate for 2019 in NI, stands at 27.4% of reported incidents, while this does represent a rise in since 2018, it is still very low and doesn't inspire confidence in the judicial system.</p> <p>Full report of Long's answer to the question can be read here.</p>
<p>Increased resources for Women's aid to tackle increased</p>	<p>3/11/20</p>	<p>Dolores Kelly (SDLP - Upper Bann) To Carál Ní Chuilín MLA,</p>	<p>The question: <i>To ask, given the increase in domestic violence, what resources her Department is allocating to meet the increased demand for Women's Aid services and refuges.</i></p>	<p>Rising domestic violence rates since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased pressure on services. Domestic violence</p>

demand for services		Minister for Communities	<p>In response to COVID-19 cost pressures faced by Supporting People service providers, additional funding of £10m has been secured. A total of £32k has been issued to date to providers to fund services to women at risk of domestic violence £400k has been allocated to Foyle Women’s Aid as a contribution to the development of the Family Justice Centre – One Safe Place. (Aims to provide a wraparound support service to victims of domestic violence)</p> <p>Women’s Aid have an additional £60,000 to provide an initial care package for families who have experienced domestic abuse.</p> <p>Work is ongoing to help raise awareness of the support services available and to ensure the provision of practical measures for victims during this challenging period. The areas of support include the 24-hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, run by Nexus NI, as well as providing advice and practical help such as accommodation and free travel for those needing to leave their homes.</p>	<p>affects all aspects of women’s lives.</p> <p>Read Ní Chuilín’s full answer here.</p> <p>The WPG called on MPs and MLAs to create ring-fenced funding for domestic violence support providers in line with additional funding allocated in GB. This statement can be viewed here.</p>
Feminist recovery plan	16/11/20	<p>Mike Nesbitt (UUP – Strangford)</p> <p>To</p> <p>Arlene Foster, First Minister</p> <p>And</p> <p>Michelle O’Neil, Deputy First Minister</p>	<p>The question:</p> <p><i>Does the first minister support the women’s policy groups COVID feminist recovery plan?</i></p> <p>She answered she hasn’t read it but would be happy for him to share it with her and come back to him on it.</p> <p>He goes on to bring up the civil service response to the plan, in which they deny a gender pay gap.</p> <p>Foster, in response acknowledges that women are disproportionately hit by COVID-19. She emphasises economic impact due to being concentrated in low paid, part-time work.</p>	<p>Acknowledgement of the plan and the issue’s it highlights is a promising indication that women will be considered in further recovery measures.</p> <p>Link to the full statement can be viewed here.</p>

			O'Neil was later answered and reiterated Fosters comments.	
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Westminster

Bills

Issue	Date	Sponsored by	Stage	Notes	Links to Feminist Recovery Plan
Assaults on Retail Workers (Offences) Bill	4/11/20	Alex Norris (Lab)	Second reading	The Bill is to make certain offences, including malicious wounding, grievous or actual bodily harm and common assault, aggravated when perpetrated against a retail worker.	Women make up the majority of retail workers and are also a vulnerable group to work-place harassment. The full bill can be read here .
Equal Pay (Information and Claims) Bill	4/11/20	Stella Creasy (Lab)	Second reading	The Bill: -Makes a provision for a right for employees to obtain information relating to the pay of a comparator - reform time limits relating to equal pay -provide a right to equal pay where a single source can rectify unequal pay -amend the statutory statement of particulars to include equal pay -provide for requirements on certain employers to publish information about the differences in pay between male and female employees and between employees of different ethnic origins	The bill aims to increase transparency around equal pay. To aid women to achieve pay parity. This will help to alleviate women's economic marginalisation. The full Bill can be read here .
Protest (Abortion Clinics) Bill	4/11/20	Sarah Olney (Lib-Dem)	Second reading	A Bill to prohibit anti-abortion protests within 150 metres of abortion clinics.	Fear of intimidation acts as a barrier to abortion. This needs to be

					<p>addressed to allow easier access to healthcare.</p> <p>More information on the Bill and it's progress can be found here.</p> <p>WPG recommendations relating to abortion and buffer zones in the Feminist Recovery Plan can be read under Pillar 2. The WPG consultation response to the NIO public consultation on an abortion framework can be read here.</p> <p>This bill would not create buffer zones in Northern Ireland.</p>
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Questions asked tabled during Oct-Nov 2020

Issue	Date	Proposed by	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Women's equal access	21 st Oct	Dehenna Davison MP (Con)	The question:	Further recognition in terms of gendered disparity of opportunities

to opportunities		To Elizabeth Truss, Minister for Women and Equalities	<p><i>Does my right hon. Friend agree that working-class children in communities who face poor outcomes deserve the full backing of the Government Equalities Office?</i></p> <p>Truss reflects a wage and educationally attainment disparity across regions and class. The minister commits the equality hub to expand beyond protected characteristics and strengthen its focus on geography and social background to identify barriers to opportunity and success.</p>	<p>regionally will reflect women in NI has particularly disadvantaged. This links to economic marginalisation.</p> <p>Read full answer to the question here.</p>
Support for female entrepreneurs	21 st Oct	Kate Griffins MP (Con) To Paul Scully, Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	<p>The question: <i>What support is there for female entrepreneurs affected by COVID?</i></p> <p>The under-secretary states there is targeted financial support for small businesses within COVID provisions that female entrepreneurs can access. He also cites childcare provisions as tackling gendered effects of COVID. Introduced 30 hours of free childcare for eligible working parents of three and four-year-olds. Wraparound childcare remains. The Department for Education will be investing £1 billion from 2021 to help create more wraparound and holiday childcare places.</p>	<p>Supporting women in business links to supporting women within the labour market and working towards breaking down barriers to economic marginalisation.</p> <p>Full statement to the question can be read here.</p>
Support to prevent women leaving the workforce due to COVID 19	21 st Oct	Ellie Reeves and Chris Elmore, MP (Lab) To Paul Scully, Under-Secretary of	<p>The question: <i>What support is proposed to prevent women leaving the workforce due to COVID-19?</i></p> <p>The coronavirus job retention scheme supporting 4.5 million jobs done by women. Committed to supporting women through our job support and bonus schemes. Extended redundancy protections for new mothers returning to work</p>	<p>Women are at an increased vulnerability to the negative effects of COVID-19 on the labour market as they are more likely to be in insecure employment.</p>

		State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	<p>and to make flexible working the default. He further cites the previously mentioned childcare provisions as supporting mothers in the labour market.</p> <p>In response to questions specifically asking about support for female workers within the leisure and retail industries which are particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID, Scully made no specific provisions for women but cited support through universal credit, job retention scheme, the self-employed income support scheme could all be accessed by the women identified.</p>	Full answer to the question can be read here .
Protection for intimidation or protest for women accessing abortions	21 st Oct	Dr Rupa Huq, MP (Lab) To Victoria Atkins, Under-secretary for the Home department	<p>The question: <i>How does the government propose to protect women from intimidation or protest when accessing abortions?</i></p> <p>The government is reconsidering their response to this issue. States it is unacceptable that women seeking services or staff be intimidated. Reached out to providers and the police as to the nature of protest.</p> <p>When asked whether she would support the Demonstrations (Abortion Clinics) Bill, Atkins responded an appropriate balance needed to be found between protection for women and freedom of speech but cited a later meeting with Huq to discuss the bill.</p> <p>She also cited the effective use of public protection orders for individual clinics.</p>	<p>Fear of intimidation or harassment act as a barrier to women having abortions.</p> <p>Read the full answer to the question here.</p>
Equal Pay	20 st Oct	Stella Creasey, MP (Lab/Co-op)	Introducing a Bill to make provision for a right for employees to obtain information relating to the pay of a comparator. As well to reform remedies and time limits relating to equal pay;	Gendered unequal pay contributes to women's economic marginalisation.

		(Motion for leave to introduce a Bill)	<p>to provide a right to equal pay where a single source can rectify unequal pay; to amend the statutory statement of particulars to include equal pay; to provide for requirements on certain employers to publish information about the differences in pay between male and female employees and between employees of different ethnic origins; and for connected purposes.</p> <p>The aim of this legislation is to increase levels of transparency and implement a 'the right to know'. It allows them the opportunity to request the information without having to go to court and make a formal request.</p>	<p>It is a core factor contributing to the gender pay gap.</p> <p>Read full statement by Creasey here.</p>
Childcare provisions	12 th Oct	<p>Sara Britcliffe, MP (Con) and Laura Farris, MP (Con)</p> <p>To Vicky Ford, Under-Secretary of State for Education.</p>	<p>The question: <i>What is the government is doing to support childcare provisions?</i></p> <p>In answer, the government is continuing to bulk-buy childcare hours from the sector at pre-COVID levels, even if providers had closed due to the pandemic. Also encouraged schools to ensure that after-school and breakfast clubs are reopening. The government have commitment is to establish a new £1 billion fund from next year to help to create more accessible childcare. However, this is dependent on the outcome of the spending review.</p>	<p>Affordable childcare is essential to women's participation within the labour market.</p> <p>Read full answer here.</p>
Protection from Domestic abuse	9 th Nov	<p>Harriett Baldwin, MP (Con)</p> <p>To Victoria Atkins,</p>	<p>The question: <i>What steps is the government taking to protect victims of domestic abuse?</i></p> <p>There is an additional significant investment of £27 million across Government to domestic abuse charities and service</p>	<p>With instances of DV increased due to COVID lockdown restrictions, provisions aim to alleviate this increase and ensure women's safety.</p>

		Under-secretary for the Home department	providers. Also run a public information campaign, #YouAreNotAlone. There is also continued to work on the Domestic Abuse Bill. She reiterates that victims of domestic abuse can leave their homes during periods of lockdown to seek help. Also says that despite a backlog in cases, the courts remain open to process court cases and protection orders involving domestic violence.	Read full answer here .
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