



WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series - COVID-19 and Violence Against Women

As part of the '16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence,' the fifth in series of Webinars on the Feminist Recovery Plan focussed on violence against women in Northern Ireland, held in collaboration with Women's Aid and Raise Your Voice, and chaired by Helen Crickard from Reclaim the Agenda (RTA). The 16 days of activism was started by the Global Women's Initiative in 1991 and is currently running from the 25th November-10th December. The theme of the Global Women's Leadership this year is protecting women in the informal workplace, which is particularly important in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic with so many women working from home.

Our first speaker was Emma Osborne from Women's Aid, who gave us an overview of the situation regarding domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. Since the initial lockdown in March 2020, it has been clear that countries around the world have seen a significant increase in the rates of domestic abuse and violence against women. In Northern Ireland, levels of domestic abuse are currently at the highest they have ever been, since recording began in 2004. On average, PSNI officers respond to a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes, with domestic abuse crimes making up 17.5% of all recorded crimes in Northern Ireland. Over the course of the year 2018/2019, 4 women died as a result of domestic violence. This year, in the context of the pandemic, 5 women have died as a result of domestic violence in the last 9 months.

Although domestic abuse can affect all genders, Emma highlighted the need for it to be recognised as a gendered crime, given its disproportionate impact on women. Women make up 69% of victims, are more likely to die as a result of abuse, and are more likely to experience abuse over a long period of time. Only 11% of perpetrators are women, compared with 89% being men. This gendered reality is often ignored by policy-makers, who largely take a gender-neutral approach when drafting legislation. Other policy-related issues Emma raised included the failure of the NI Government to abide by obligations contained within the Istanbul Convention to introduce a dedicated Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

Northern Ireland is currently the only place in the UK without such a dedicated strategy, and also without a dedicated Domestic Abuse Commissioner to oversee the implementation of Domestic Abuse legislation. Furthermore, although a Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill has been introduced which will make coercive control an offence in NI, there is an absence of commitment to funding for training and resources to make this legislation effective. There is an urgent need for policy-makers to address this issue, by bringing Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK and Ireland, and fulfilling its obligations under international human rights agreements.

Our second speaker was Elaine Crory, the Good Relations Co-Ordinator at the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and project worker on projects such as Raise Your Voice and Reclaim the Night. The Raise Your Voice Project is a joint initiative between WRDA, RTA, the Women's Support Network and the NI Rural Women's Network. Its focus is on tackling issues of sexual harassment and violence in communities around Northern Ireland, and was set up in the wake of the Belfast Rugby Rape Trial in 2018. Specifically, its aim is to raise awareness of and help reduce rates of gender-based violence, which can include sexual violence, online abuse, street harassment, honour killings, and more. Raise Your Voice hold online and in-person workshops, lobby policy-makers, and promote awareness-raising campaigns in NI on these issues.

Elaine explained that although gender-based violence is most visible on the physical level, when we hear about attacks or murders, it permeates through all levels of society and can manifest in many different forms, such as gender-based stereotyping. The prevalence of gender-based violence relies on a culture of silence and fear, underpinned by deep-rooted misogyny. As Elaine stressed, the "disease of misogyny in our society" must be addressed by recognising misogyny as a motivator of hate crime, the need for which was highlighted recently in the context of a cluster of organised misogynistic attacks in Belfast. Rather than educating women as to how to protect themselves against gender-based violence, it is essential that we take measures to prevent perpetrators from carrying out gender-based violence, of which women make up the majority of victims.

Building upon points raised by Emma, Elaine also stressed the need to recognise sexual harassment and violence as issues which often happen behind closed doors, perpetrated by those closest to victims such as family members, partners, or friends. In the context of COVID-19, this has become a particular problem as victims do not have the same ability to seek support outside of their home, due to recurring lockdowns. Furthermore, although levels of sexual harassment and violence in the physical workplace may have reduced, these issues are still prevalent in the context of the virtual workplace, and the online environment more generally. This demonstrates that although the ways in which gender-based violence is perpetrated are changing, it will continue to prevail until measures are taken to address the root of the problem (which has always remained the same); namely, misogyny.

As Elaine explained, in Northern Ireland, there is "an endless amount of unwillingness to really look the problem in the eye and say we do have a society that undervalues women and which turns a blind eye to violence against women." In order to do this, it is essential that there is greater awareness of the issue, better education at school-level and in the workplace, and more willingness to create change. Raise Your Voice encourage victims of gender-based violence to share their stories, if they feel comfortable doing so, in

order to continue the conversation around this important issue. There is a section of the Raise Your Voice website dedicated to these anonymised stories where you can read about people's experiences and write about your own. The educational impact of these stories is so important, as Northern Ireland suffers from a real problem of lack of education around consent, sex, and relationships which projects such as Raise Your Voice are trying to compensate for.

Both Emma and Elaine pointed to the important role of the media in tackling gender-based violence, as the way in which it is reported has the power to shape society's perception of the issue. Women's Aid have recently launched a set of guidelines for journalists to follow when reporting about domestic abuse or domestic homicide. Emma stressed that journalists should follow these guidelines and consult with specialist organisations before publishing articles and headlines regarding domestic abuse, which can often be triggering for victims and perpetuate negative societal understandings of the issue. For example, by diminishing the responsibility of the perpetrator, and implying the complicity of the victim.

Gender-based violence is underpinned by misogyny, and will prevail for as long as women in society are viewed as unequal and subordinate to men. In order to tackle gender inequality, and gender-based violence more specifically, it is not enough to simply pass legislation; this legislation must be accompanied by comprehensive funding and awareness campaigns. The essential service provisions for victims in Northern Ireland such as those provided by Women's Aid, are under-resourced and under-valued, meaning that many women in need of help are turned away and left without crucial support. Despite the fact that more than 200 recommendations were made in the Gillen Report two years ago, regarding how to combat gender-based violence in Northern Ireland, barely any of these have been addressed and still require urgent attention.

This Webinar saw valuable contributions being made to the conversation around violence against women, and discussion and questions at the end between Helen, Emma and Elaine showcased the collective strength of the Northern Ireland Women's Sector in contributing to creating positive change. More information on the issues raised in this Webinar can be found in the full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, which all speakers contributed to the creation of as members of the Women's Policy Group (WPG). Our next Webinar will be focussed on human rights and the impact of Brexit and a potential Bill of Rights on women in Northern Ireland. See you then!