



WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series – Women’s Rights, Brexit and the Bill of Rights

It was fitting that the final Webinar of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series took place on International Human Rights day 2020; drawing to a close what has been a vibrant, informative, and illuminating series of events focussed on shedding light on the situation regarding women’s rights in Northern Ireland. This event took place in collaboration with the Human Rights Consortium, and explored the topic of women’s rights in the context of Brexit, UNSCR 1325 and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Throughout this series, the individual pillars of the Feminist Recovery Plan have been explored in depth, covering a range of issues which included; women’s poverty, women’s role in peace building; the digital divide, and sexual violence. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, each Webinar brought into sharp focus the varied and complex impact it has had on women’s lives. For the final Webinar, the focus was on how women’s rights, and human rights more generally, can be safeguarded and progressed in Northern Ireland, in the context of Brexit.

The first speaker was Helena Macormac, who is on the working group for a Bill of Rights. Having also been a board member and Commissioner for various human rights bodies, Helena has a wealth of experience and knowledge regarding the protection of human rights in Northern Ireland. In her presentation, Helena outlined the reasons for why introducing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is so essential for all Northern Ireland citizens, but women more specifically; particularly, in the context of Brexit.

The Good Friday Agreement (1998) made a commitment to introducing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, an Agreement which was voted for by the Northern Irish people, signed by the UK Government, the Irish Government and the NI Executive. 22 years later, there has been no Bill of Rights introduced. Helena stressed that it is a constitutional imperative, and an international obligation, that a Bill of Rights is finally introduced.

The United Kingdom's exit from the EU, as of January 2021, will have a number of significant implications for human rights law in Northern Ireland. Most importantly, it will remove us from the EU Charter of Rights, from which many of the human rights we currently enjoy are derived from. Although the UK Government has given a commitment to ensuring no roll-back of these rights, once we leave the EU, it will have no international obligations to make sure this is the case. This is particularly concerning in regards to women's rights, as without EU human rights legislation, there are a number of gaps in the UK's legislative protection of women and girls.

The UK Government has obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to guarantee the protection of women and girls against all forms of discrimination, but without a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, the ability for women in Northern Ireland to hold Government accountable at an international level remains limited. Helena also stressed that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland could have significant symbolic benefits for women and girls in Northern Ireland, which would empower them to educate themselves and others about these rights, and therefore incorporate them into the domestic popular narrative.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities women have faced for decades, but which have been exacerbated as a result of the health crisis. Importantly, a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland could address a number of these issues and reassure women that their rights will be protected and progressed even after we are removed from the EU Charter. A key take-away from Helena's presentation was the need for Government to prioritise the needs of those on the margins of society, something which introducing a Bill of Rights could contribute positively to.

The second speaker was Annmarie O'Kane from the Centre for Cross-Border Studies and Website 'Border People.' Annmarie focused on the impact Brexit will have on those who regularly cross the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Annmarie pointed out that the majority of clients who contact 'Border People' for help and advice are women. Many cross-border workers, families, and businesses are in a time of great uncertainty with Brexit on the horizon, and frequently contact 'Border People' to access resources and support. The help and advice 'Border People' provide to those who are impacted most by the border is largely based on regulations and rights which come from the EU. Although some EU standards have already been incorporated into UK law, once the UK leaves the EU, it will no longer be obligated to meet these standards, and many fear that those which have been incorporated into UK law will be overturned in coming years.

Many questions remain in regards to women's rights and family rights after Brexit. For example, women who are suffering as a result of domestic abuse currently have a right to flee across the border to access safety and support. However, after Brexit, future rights to freedom of movement between Northern Ireland and the Republic are unclear. There are also concerns regarding the complicated nature of UK immigration rules, which may make it even more difficult for Northern Ireland citizens to understand these rights. For example, EU citizens wishing to continue living in Northern Ireland may need to apply to the EU Settlement scheme, which is a complicated process and particularly difficult for vulnerable people, such as domestic abuse victims, to access due to its requirement of providing detailed family information.

Annamarie did point out that some reassurance can be found in the agreed NI Protocol, which will be implemented whether there is a deal or not between the UK and the EU prior to January 2021, as it will offer some protection for those living in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Dedicated Mechanism which has been set up by the NI Executive, comprised of the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, will play an important role in making sure the rights of Northern Ireland citizens continue to be protected.

As we saw with the COVID-19 pandemic, times of crises impact all women differently; and it is often the most vulnerable who suffer the most. In the context of Brexit, and the political and economic uncertainty it brings, it is crucial that the rights of NI citizens, and women in particular, are protected against any potential roll-backs, after we leave the EU Charter. It is also important that pressure is maintained on the UK Government, not only to continue to protect the rights which are guaranteed in EU law, but to keep pace with advancements in EU human rights law. In order to do this, support from the NGO and voluntary sector is crucial.

The third and final speaker was Jonna Monaghan from the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), an organisation which has ensured a strong link between the NI women's sector and the European Parliament for a number of years. Jonna gave an insightful presentation on the existing international standards regarding women's rights, and how these link to Brexit and the prospect of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Many discussions regarding a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland revolve around the question of: what should it include? Jonna highlighted the need to include recommendations from CEDAW in any prospective Bill of Rights, as it sets out a comprehensive agenda for equality in law, and would ensure human rights, and women's rights in particular, are kept on the political agenda.

Jonna emphasised the strong role civil society plays in facilitating positive change regarding human rights law, stressing the need to maintain pressure on government institutions in order to create this change. Much work has been done in the last two decades to bring about better implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in Northern Ireland; and much of this change is the result of grass roots lobbying and campaigning. In regards to advocating for a Bill of Rights, one which includes commitments found in CEDAW, this same grass roots lobbying from the women's sector and other human rights groups will play a crucial role. These organisations help to bridge the gap between international rights (which can often feel distant from people's day-to-day lives) and domestic settings, where the on-the-ground implementation of these rights take place.

Jonna explained a number of different ways in which lobbyists and human rights organisations can ensure that women's rights are kept on the political agenda; such as speaking to individual MLAs, addressing All-Party Groups, and writing to Ministers. In this way, there are multiple avenues through which links can be made between civil society and Government; links which should be utilised when advocating for human rights change. This engagement will be crucial in the coming year, as the UK leaves Brexit and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be felt.

The Webinar finished on a positive note of hope regarding prospects for change, and appreciation for all the work that has been done by the community and voluntary sector, over the course of what has been an extremely difficult year. Looking ahead to the coming

months, all of our speakers made a call for unity; encouraging human rights groups to continue to work together, as it is this collective strength which will be most influential in bringing about positive change for women's rights in Northern Ireland.

Thank you to everyone who has attended events as part of the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series, and to all of our wonderful speakers over the past few months!