

WRDA Stormont and Westminster Update –February 2021

Summary

In February 2021, 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](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020-.pdf).

In addition to reflecting bills and oral questions answered in both governments, this summary also reflects consultation responses by the Women’s Policy Group (WPG). Domestic abuse legislation has continued to be a prominent discussion and legislative area for consideration.

The issue of **Domestic Violence**, has seen significant development, with the Stormont bill reaching its final stage. There has also been consultation on further bills to ensure increased legal protections for victims of domestic violence. Similarly, in Westminster a domestic abuse bill has reached the report stage of the House of Lords. All of these developments look promising as the urgency of the issue has only been exacerbated during the pandemic and as we look to recovery long-term solutions to the issue are welcomed.

**Economic** developments in Westminster have mainly focused on COVID support as well as ministerial maternity leave. In Northern Ireland, a work-life balance bill is under consultation, seeking to embed some of the EU legislation on worker’s rights to a work-life balance.

In terms of **justice**, questions have been asked in the NI assembly about both the potential of establishing rape crisis centres as well as procedures around the investigation of serious sexual offences.

Other consultations have also included a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights and a Climate Change Bill.

**Stormont**

Bills- Feb 2021

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| Issue | Proposed by | Stage | Comments | Links to the feminist recovery plan |
| Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill | Naomi Long- Minister for Justice | Final stage | 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.  The Bill is in its final stage.  The Bill creates a new domestic abuse offence in Northern Ireland that closes a gap in the law. The new offence ensures as wide a range of abusive behaviours as possible can be captured, including coercive control as well as psychological, emotional, and financial abuse. It will also capture patterns of two or more occasions of physical and/or psychological abuse by a partner, ex-partner or close family member and will include behaviour that is physically violent, threatening or intimidating. Domestic abuse will also be recognised in other offences, with the potential for increased sentencing.  The Bill extends the scope of the current child cruelty offence. As well as provides protection for victims of domestic abuse who need legal representation in family law cases in the courts.  More detailed provision on training, reporting and independent oversight of the new offence as well as associated guidance is also included. The legislation also prevents perpetrators of domestic abuse directly cross-examining their victims in criminal and family proceedings and ensures that special measures are available to them. | Incidences of domestic abuse have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.  There was already insufficient support for women and families suffering domestic abuse, therefore the creation of the bill offers provisions etc. to address the issue.  Recommendations from the WPG in relation to the bill can be viewed in Pillar 4 of the Feminist Recovery Plan.  The WPG evidence submission to the Justice Committee can be viewed [here](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WPG-NI-Evidence-Submission-to-Justice-Committee-05.06.20.pdf).  All amendments and progress on the bill can be viewed [here](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2017-2022-mandate/primary-legislation---bills-2017---2022-mandate/domestic-abuse-bill/). |

Non-Executive Bills

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| Issue | Proposed by | Stage (as of 3rd  Jan) | Comments | Link to Feminist Recovery Plan |
| Work-Life Balance Bill | Martina Anderson MLA | Consultation period | This is a consultation on a Private Members' Bill on work-life balance which is currently in development. The EU Directive on Work Life Balance was adopted by the European Council on 13th June 2019. Given that the NI no longer automatically keeps pace with improved EU rights and standards for workers as a result of Brexit, this Bill aims to at least guarantee the entitlements included in the EU Work-Life Balance Directive for workers in NI.  The EU Directive provides for 5 days unpaid carers leave per year. This bill aims to go further by introducing paid carers leave in NI. The EU Directive as a minimum, states that all workers with caring responsibilities will be afforded a right to request flexible working. The Work Life Balance Bill goes beyond that and will give all workers regardless of their status the right to request flexible working.  The deadline for the consultation period is the 8th of April. | Women represent a significant number of NI’s carers. Therefore, the right to unpaid carers leave as well as flexible working impacts women disproportionately.  [Link](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/PT6RF65) to the consultation survey and more information. |

Questions asked- tabled during Feb 2021.

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| Issue | Date | Asked by: | Notes | Link to Feminist Recovery Plan |
| Rape crisis centre | 8/2/21 | Cara Hunter  (SDLP - East Londonderry)  To  Naomi Long,  Minister for Justice | The Question:  “To ask the Minister of Justice what consideration her Department has given to a rape crisis centre in Northern Ireland.”  To be answered. | Support services for rape crisis victims helps women access support and strengthens access to justice.  Link to [updates.](http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/oralresults.aspx?&sd=08/02/2021&s=23&m=01/02/2021%2000:00:00) |
| Sexual offences | 8/2/21 | Matthew O'Toole  (SDLP - South Belfast)  To  Naomi Long,  Minister for Justice | The question  “To ask the Minister of Justice what action has been taken to implement the recommendations of the Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland.”  There has been substantial progress against the key priority areas set out in The Gillen Implementation Plan, published in July 2020.  Two interim Remote Evidence Centres, one in Craigavon and the other in Belfast, are now ready for use and will commence operations as soon as suitable cases are identified. These facilities will provide victims and witnesses with a less daunting environment from which to give evidence and eliminate any chance of encountering the defendant or their family in court.  From 1 April 2021, adult complainants will have access to fully qualified Sexual Offences Legal Advisors (or SOLAs) via a pilot scheme delivered through Victim Support NI. SOLAs will provide advice in relation to the disclosure of evidence, the use of previous sexual history and will ensure that their clients’ interests and wishes are communicated to the Public Prosecution Service.  Work continues in regard to the provision of appropriate training for justice partners; improving Relationship and Sexuality Education for children and young people and enhancing the existing protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years. I also intend to bring forward legislation in this mandate to bring into effect a number of Gillen recommendations. | Strengthen procedure around the investigation of serious sexual offences strengthens women’s access to justice.  Link to the full answer can be found [here.](http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/oralresults.aspx?&sd=08/02/2021&s=23&m=01/02/2021%2000:00:00) |

Consultations

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| Issue | Notes | Link to Feminist Recovery plan |
| Response to the Department of Finance Draft Budget for 2021-2022 | The response se highlighted the need to put women at the heart of public policy consultation. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women, areas highlighted include employment, childcare, gender segregated labour markets and care work and austerity. | Women were disproportionately economically affected by COVID.  Link to the [full response.](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WPG-Response-to-the-Draft-Budget-for-2021-2022-PfG-Draft-Outcomes-and-Draft-Budget-Equality-Screenings-25.02.21.pdf) |
| Legal  protections for victims of domestic violence | Consultations mainly centres around the use and regulation of Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Domestic Abuse Protection Orders.  The response recommends there use to protect victims, citing their adoption as enforced by international law. The response then goes on to make specific recommendations about implementation. | Further strengthening legal protection of domestic abuse victims supports them during legal cases and ultimately serves to promote justice.  Link to [full response](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WPG-Response-on-Enhancing-Legal-Protections-for-Victims-of-Domestic-Abuse-Public-Consultation.pdf) |
| Bill of Rights | The consultation responses reflect the urgent need of implementation of a bill of rights for NI.  This is of particular importance now in the context of Brexit, where many of women’s hard-fought rights are now at risk. The responses recommend added protections of rights based on gender as well as other protected characteristics and uses evidence from CEDAW amongst other sources. WPG recommends incorporating social, economic and cultural rights into a bill, due to the disproportionately effect COVID 19 has had on women’s rights and its on-ongoing effects | Incorporating specific protections into the Bill of Rights for NI promotes gendered policy and works to make the bill comprehensive in its protection of women.  Link to [full response.](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WRDA-Bill-of-Rights-Consultation-Response-04.02.21.pdf) |
| Climate Change bill | The consultation response highlights within COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2020,  the need to treat care as a part of our essential infrastructure and for care to be prioritised as a  low-emission and green sector. The plan also made recommendations to introduce a Feminist Green New Deal.  Within this feminist Green New Deal would include:  ● Redressing economic and social disadvantages faced by women,  ● Changing social norms of gender at home and at work to share and value care,  ● Increasing women’s representation in all aspects of public life and decision-making,  ● Ending violence against women and girls. | Transitions towards a green economy under an climate change bill also have the potential to have gender equality embedded within them.  Link to the full consultation response is [here](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WPG-Response-to-Discussion-Document-on-a-Climate-Change-Bill-01.02.21.pdf). |

Westminster

Bills February 2021

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| Issue | Date | Sponsored by | Stage | Notes | Links to Feminist Recovery Plan |
| Domestic Abuse Bill | 15/2/21 | Priti Patel  Home Office  Baroness Williams of Trafford  Home Office | Report Stage in the House of Lords. | The Bill aims to establish a Domestic Abuse Commissioner; to prohibit cross-examination in person in family proceedings in certain circumstances; to make provision about certain violent or sexual offences, and offences involving other abusive behaviour, committed outside the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes. | Domestic abuse has been recognised as a prominent problem within the UK. As exacerbated by COVID new legislation to tackle all associated factors is welcomed.  The full bill can be read and it’s progress can be accessed [here.](https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2019-21/domesticabuse.html)  This does not affect or impact NI domestic abuse and family proceedings bill. |
| Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill | 25/02/21 | Penny Mordaunt  HM Treasury  Lord True  HM Treasury | Committee stage in the House of Lords | A Bill to make provision for payments to or in respect of Ministers and holders of Opposition offices on maternity leave. | Maternity leave enhances the economic rights of women. Within this context it also aids their political representation  Link to full details of the Bill can be found [here.](https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2019-21/ministerialandothermaternityallowances.html) |

Questions asked tabled during February 2021

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| Covid-19: Support for Women | 10/02/21 | Richard Thomson MP (SNP)  To  Kemi Badenoch,  Minster for Equalities | The question:  “What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of Government support for women during the covid-19 outbreak?”  The response consisted of highlighting the general support that can be accessed by all. Citing a higher redundancy amongst men. Thomson asked about universal credit childcare payment system, citing the recent court case that found it to be unlawful and discriminatory against women. To which Badenoch replied the government have announced a £20 uplift. When asked about childcare and the pressure of furlough on parents, the minister replied there is a provision under universal credit. | COVID has disproportionately impacted women across the UK. The factors highlighted by the feminist recovery plan can be seen in GB.  Read full answer to the question [here.](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-10/debates/501FC6DD-A1E9-499A-82AC-60151B673382/Covid-19SupportForWomen) |