



WRDA Stormont and Westminster Update –March 2021

Summary

In March 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](#).

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), briefing reports from WRDA, Gender equality strategy expert advisory panel report and Ad-hoc committee for the Bill of Rights report from WPG.

The issue of Women's **safety** both from **street harassment and assault** but also **domestic violence** has been prominent across both governments. In the same month as the death of Sarah Everard, there were oral questions around safer streets for women in Westminster as well as questions around the right to protest with regard to COVID regulations. In Stormont, the finalisation of the Domestic Abuse Bill was quickly followed by the introduction of a protection from stalking bill. Oral questions have also included questions around the media campaign to inform the public of the new domestic abuse legislation as well as a question around strengthening justice mechanisms around sexual offences. Oral questions around the introduction of Relationship and Sex Education have also been featured as another method to tackle these issues.

Women's **Economic** inequality has been highlighted particularly in NI through the consultation responses to a proposed Carers Act, a briefing on Worker's Rights from WRDA and an Ad-hoc committee report on the proposed Bill of Rights. A briefing on the climate justice plan also highlights how women's economic rights and climate justice are linked. The Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report also reflects the current state of women's economic inequality as well as a wide range of other gendered issues across a wide policy remit.

In terms of **health**, Northern Irish women's reproductive rights have been an agenda point for both governments. With oral questions asked in Westminster and Stormont as well as a non-executive bill proposed around buffer zones around health clinics to aid access.

Stormont

Bills- March 2021

Issue	Proposed by	Stage	Comments	Links to the feminist recovery plan
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill	Naomi Long-Minister for Justice	Completed- received Royal Assent 01/03/21	<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>The Bill is complete and has received royal assent.</p> <p>Link to the bill.</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. 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>All amendments and progress on the bill can be viewed here.</p>

<p>Protection from stalking bill</p>	<p>Naomi Long-Minister for Justice</p>	<p>Second stage</p>	<p>A Bill to provide protection from stalking, and from threatening or abusive behaviour, and for related purposes.</p> <p>The new legislation will be better focused on stalking behaviour and will have greater and more appropriate penalties and protections than are available under current harassment legislation. The introduction of stalking protection orders (SPOs) will be a key tool for the police. The orders will enable them to intervene prior to any conviction to address stalking behaviours before they become entrenched or escalate in severity and to protect victims quickly when there is an immediate risk of harm.</p> <p>The Bill is divided into three parts. The first part creates a new specific offence of stalking. That will address behaviour or acts associated with stalking, something that the current harassment law does not do. The Bill also creates the offence of threatening and abusive behaviour, which can be triggered by a single incident. The new offence of stalking will ensure compliance with the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. That requires extraterritorial jurisdiction to be extended to the stalking offence. The second part of the Bill provides for the introduction of stalking protection orders. Part 3 deals with the interpretation, commencement, and short title of the Bill.</p>	<p>Stalking is a gendered crime, with women representing a disproportionate number of victims. Stalking commonly happens within a context of domestic abuse and links to elements of coercive control.</p> <p>Link to information on the Bill here.</p>
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Non-Executive Bills

Issue	Proposed by	Stage (as of 3 rd Jan)	Comments	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Safe Access Zones Bill (Public Health and Well Being) Bill	Clare Bailey MLA	Consultation carried forward from previous mandate.	This bill looks to provide safe access to healthcare facilities including buffer zones around reproductive healthcare facilities.	This would enhance the ability of women to access healthcare services without fear of intimidation.

Questions asked- tabled during Feb 2021.

Issue	Date	Asked by:	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Domestic Abuse: Media Campaign	1/3/21	Colin McGrath (SDLP- South Down) To Naomi Long, Minister for Justice	The Question: “when is the media campaign in relation to the new domestic abuse offences is due to be launched?” This will late in late autumn. This will involve a multimedia campaign and will be externally sourced, it is important that victims and perpetrators are aware of the new offence.	Incidences of domestic abuse have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the new bill comes into effect, it is important victims are aware of it. Link to here .
Sexual offences	1/3/21	Paula Bradley MLA (DUP- North Belfast) To Naomi Long,	The question “to ask the Minister of Justice for her views on a session at a conference last week that focused on violence against women and girls, with a female judge and a female barrister agreeing that the tariffs for domestic abuse need to be used to their	Violence against women particularly domestic abuse has become a pertinent issue in relation to COVID-19 recovery. Strengthening legal

		Minister for Justice	<p>maximum in order to give a clear message that domestic abuse is not tolerated in our society.”</p> <p>This is a matter for the judiciary, she hopes that the judge who gave this opinion will communicate this to her fellow judges.</p>	<p>protections for victims enhances women’s ability to access justice.</p> <p>Link to the full answer can be found here.</p>
Relationship and sex education	15/3/21	Chris Lyttle MLA (Alliance-East Belfast) To Peter Weir, Minister for education	<p>The question: “the Minister of Education whether he agrees that standardised relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is fundamental to promoting appropriate behaviour and to preventing serious sexual offences against women and girls and to state the action that he has taken to implement the Gillen review recommendations, including a school sexual offences awareness campaign, particularly in light of the fact that the outpouring of pain and anger in response to the heinous murder of Sarah Everard and in relation to male violence against women and girls has been palpable.”</p> <p>The Minister for Justice and Education have had a meeting to discuss the issue raised by the Gillen review including RSE and teacher training related to this. They are working together to ensure full implementation of this report. He cites the Northern Ireland curriculum has none-prescriptive, working with the Justice department to address issues around what would be included in the curriculum. Highlighted consent and domestic abuse as tow core issues to be included.</p>	<p>RSE has been identified as key factor in addressing violence against women and other issues of gender inequality. As a mechanism to enhance long-term change on these issues, it is important a standardised approach is taken.</p> <p>Link to the full answer is here.</p>
Abortion services	22/3/21	Paula Bradshaw MLA (Alliance-) To	<p>The question: “What actions does the Minister for health intend to take to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland in line with</p>	<p>Abortion access is a key indicator of women’s access to reproductive health. The problem has</p>

		Robin Swann, Minister for Health	<p>CEDAW recommendations as must be provided in law under section 9 Northern Ireland Act 2019?”</p> <p>The minister for health says these provisions have been blocked by the executive citing having brought a paper to establish an early medical abortion service to the executive in April and resubmitted the paper in May. As yet, no decision has been taken by the executive and no service commissioned. Since that time, no further action has been taken to issue a commissioning directive. He states that the reason for this deferral to the executive is due to the cross-cutting and controversial nature of the issue.</p>	<p>been heightened through COVID travel restrictions inciting more urgency around the issue.</p> <p>Link to the full answer is here.</p>
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[Consultation responses from WRDA](#)

Issue	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery plan
Response to Carers Act	<p>The response to this consultation reflects the gender segregated nature of the labour market and therefore the high level of representation of women within care work.</p> <p>The key recommendations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to appropriate advice and where required to adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) • Action must be taken to acknowledge the many women who work in precarious, low-paid jobs that are unable to stay at home due to employer reluctance to furlough these workers. • Measures should be introduced to prevent employees from being Penalised for other responsibilities including childcare etc. • Urgently increase the supply and visibility of women with disruptive technical skills. 	<p>Women represent a significant majority of those within caring roles in NI. To enhance their rights through a Carers Act would enhance their economic and social rights.</p> <p>Link to the full response.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring may help carers get back into paid employment. • For a better, more resilient economy, it is essential that we value and recognise care work. It needs to be a valued job that is paid well, attracts investment in education and training, provides opportunities for promotion and is seen as a valued career. • Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data. • Increase the level of Carer’s Allowance and consider a one-off Coronavirus supplement of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit as suggested by Carers UK.²¹ • Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy. 	
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[Briefing documents produced by WRDA March 2021](#)

Issue	Notes	Links to feminist recovery plan
Climate justice plan	The briefing includes details of the links between gender equality and climate justice. It also highlights the care industry as a key industry for sustainable innovation. The briefing proposes that a feminist Green New Deal should be considered within which priorities set out by new decade new approach would be combined with aims of gender-equality. Key recommendations centre around investment in social infrastructure, green jobs, sharing care, democracy and ownership and international responsibilities.	Climate justice and gender equality are linked in that there are industries with predominantly women workers such as the care industry that have the potential for enhanced sustainability. Link to the full briefing here.
Worker’s rights	The briefing includes details of Women’s employment, gender pay reporting, gender segregated markets in particular the affect this has on care work, women’s poverty and the	Women’s economic inequality has increased

	effect of austerity, childcare as a worker's rights issue, disabled women, the effect of Brexit on women's rights.	over COVID-19. This is a comprehensive reflection of these issues drawing on the themes of the Feminist recovery plan. Link to full briefing here
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Other reports- March 2021

Panel	Summary	Link to feminist recovery plan
Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report	<p>This report serves to provide evidence of the scope of discrimination women face and how these inequalities can and should be embedded to be addressed across a wide policy remit. This includes reflecting equality and human rights legislation frameworks. The report highlights gender equality issues related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment, pay and work-life balance. • Poverty and economic justice • Adult social care • Health • Representation, public life, peacebuilding, and community cohesion • Gender based- violence, misogyny and justice • Education, training and changing culture • Environment and climate change 	<p>This report reflects a wide range of pillars incorporated within the feminist recovery plan. These themes reflect gender inequality across a range of policy areas.</p> <p>Link to the full report here.</p>
Ad-hoc committee on a Bill of Rights- Women's Policy Group report	<p>The discussion focused on what a Bill of Rights should look like, ensures accountability on the protection and advancement of rights. Women's sector has been calling for a Bill of Rights consistently but has become no necessary due to Brexit and COVID-19. Opportunity to provide everyone particularly women with formal rights protections particularly around social and economic protections. Vast evidence of gender inequality in Northern Ireland, creation of Bill of Rights is a key opportunity to advance gender equality and take an intersectional focus to reflect</p>	<p>The Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland has the potential to further and formalised women's rights within NI. This</p>

	<p>people’s complex identities. The report emphasises the importance of basing a bill of rights on international human rights standards. This has the potential to be transformational to the lives of women across Northern Ireland.</p>	<p>would work to mitigate gender inequality across a range of issues.</p> <p>Link to the full report here.</p>
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Westminster

Bills March 2021

Issue	Date	Sponsored by	Stage	Notes	Links to Feminist Recovery Plan
Domestic Abuse Bill	30/3/21	Priti Patel Home Office Baroness Williams of Trafford Home Office	Final stage-consideration of amendments	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.	<p>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.</p> <p>The full bill can be read and its progress can be accessed here.</p> <p>This does not affect or impact NI domestic</p>

					abuse and family proceedings bill.
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Questions asked tabled during March 2021

Issue	Date	Proposed by	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Abortion in NI	25/03/21	Carla Lockheart MP DUP To Brandan Lewis, Secretary for state Northern Ireland.	The question: "To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the provision of abortion in Northern Ireland." Lewis reaffirmed the UK governments intention to take action to commission abortion services in line with CEDAW recommendations.	Abortion access is a key factor on achieving gender equality in health. Read the full debate here .
Safer streets for women	24/03/21	Simon Fell MP Con To Kemi Badenoch, Minister for Equalities	The question: 'What steps she is taking to ensure that good practice on making streets safer for women is shared?' They have more than doubling the safer streets fund and are building on what works by supporting measures such as better lighting and CCTV. The Minister for Crime and Policing will also hold a summit with police, the violence against women and girls sector, and industry representatives from the night-time economy on preparations to protect women as pandemic restrictions lift.	Women's safety from street harassment and violence is essential to gender equality in both their safety and allowing them to access work ad education. Link to full response is here .
Policing and Prevention of Violence	15/03/21	Speaker To Priti Petal,	The question: 'To discuss the relationship between the covid-19 regulations and the right to protest.'	The right to protest is essential to establishing

<p>against Women</p>		<p>Home secretary</p>	<p>The met have been requested to undergo a review into the events at Clapham common and produce a report to be shared with the home secretary. The Domestic Abuse Bill is on track to receive Royal Assent by the end of April, and this will transform the collective response to this aspect of violence against women. It builds on other measures that have been introduced, including the controlling or coercive behaviour offence and the domestic violence disclosure scheme, known as Clare’s law, which enables individuals to ask the police whether their partner a violent or abusive past. They have also introduced new preventative tools and powers to tackle crimes including stalking, female genital mutilation and upskirting.</p> <p>The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will end the halfway release of those convicted for sexual offences such as rape. Instead, criminals responsible for these crimes will spend at least two thirds of their time behind bars. The new law will extend the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 with regard to the abuse of positions of trust—and it will introduce Kay’s law, which will encourage the police to impose pre-charge bail with appropriate conditions.</p> <p>She urged everyone to not to participate in large gatherings or attend protests. The right to protest is the cornerstone of our democracy, but the Government’s duty remains to prevent more lives from being lost during the pandemic.</p>	<p>rights related to gender equality.</p> <p>Link to the full debate here.</p>
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