



WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series - Climate Justice as a Feminist Issue

The final webinar in the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series, held in collaboration with the Human Rights Consortium and Friends of the Earth, focused on the topic of climate justice and the key question of: Why is climate justice a feminist issue? The Webinar hosted a range of speakers, including Women's Sector Lobbyist Rachel Powell, activist and academic V'cenza Cirefice and writer and activist, Lynda Sullivan, who each provided a unique perspective on the topic and emphasised their commitment to working together toward a gender equal, green economy for Northern Ireland.

The first speaker was Women's Sector Lobbyist, Rachel Powell, with the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), who is also chair of the Women's Policy Group and a member of the expert panel for the Northern Ireland Gender Equality Strategy. The Women's Policy Group (WPG) Feminist Recovery Plan covers a number of key areas regarding gender inequality, including a section on 'A Feminist Green Economy' which looks at the potential of a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland and how this should be met from a feminist perspective. Rachel pointed out that, although discussions are ongoing about introducing a Green New Deal, Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK and Ireland without a binding greenhouse gas reduction target.

Building on research by the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) and the Women's Environmental Network (WEN),¹ Rachel emphasised the need to place care work (paid and unpaid) at the centre of discussions around creating a feminist green economy and developing a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland. The care industry is an existing low-pollution industry, with 30% less green house gas emissions than the construction industry, yet it

¹ Cohen, M. and MacGregor, S. (2020) '[Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK](#)', *Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network*.

remains an underfunded and undervalued part of our economy. Caring responsibilities have dramatically increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these are predominantly undertaken by women (85% of care jobs are done by women). By placing care at the core of our economy, not only would this mean investing in a key sustainable industry, but it would also mean taking meaningful steps toward creating a gender equal society, which values this critical work which is predominantly done by women.

Rachel finished on a hopeful note, explaining how small amounts of investment in care can create significant returns in terms of both employment opportunities and service improvement, and should be prioritised in drafting a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland. For example, according to WBG research, a 2% GDP investment in care creates double the amount of jobs for women and almost the same amount of jobs for men than the same investment in construction. Further, as we move out of lockdown, Rachel stressed how essential it is that we re-think our economic decision making and prioritise tackling the climate crisis in an intersectional, gender-sensitive way. This includes involving women, representatives from the women's sector and representatives from the environment sector in all decision-making relating to economic planning. Rachel emphasised that efforts to decarbonise the economy must be done in tandem with efforts to address gender inequality; but that gender equality should not be achieved at the expense of climate justice, and climate justice should not be achieved at the expense of gender equality, for example, through the continued exploitation of women's (often unpaid) labour.

The second speaker was V'cenza Cirefice, an eco-feminist researcher and activist, specialising in environmental justice studies through a feminist lens. V'cenza gave an insightful presentation on the links between gender inequality and climate injustice, and explained how each of these issues are rooted in the same problematic social structures; namely, patriarchal capitalist structures. These structures are underpinned by an ideology which sees the environment, and women, as objects to be conquered, dominated and exploited for economic and social gains. Therefore, although women are in line to face the brunt of the climate crisis, this is not because of any essential identity which makes them inherently more vulnerable, but because of the structural inequalities which exist as a result of this world order which become exacerbated in times of crises.

According to V'cenza, this world order forces us to live in a system which treats women and nature as commodities to extract from, yet by doing so, exhausts the base (women's labour and natural resources) which it depends on for its survival. Despite their crucial role in the maintenance and sustainability of world economies, the environment and women are not accounted for under the current economic model. V'cenza seconded the point raised by Rachel that in working towards a greener economy, this must be done in a way that is not at the expense of achieving gender equality, as the two issues are inextricably linked. Therefore, it is crucial that we find feminist solutions to the climate crisis, in a way which challenges pre-existing power structures and tackles the inequalities which exist in our society.

V'cenza also finished on a hopeful note, emphasising the agency and remarkable capability of women to challenge the systems and structures which uphold this patriarchal capitalist world order, which we are already seeing through widespread eco-feminist activism, primarily spear-headed by women. Despite facing threats and violence, women

continue to stand up against these unequal power structures demanding positive change. As Northern Ireland begins to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic, V'cenza highlighted the need to use this as a unique opportunity to 'build back better' and start valuing the life-sustaining work done by women in the care industry and prioritise a feminist green recovery which takes a holistic approach to tackling climate change, with social justice at its core.

The third and final speaker was Lynda Sullivan, a writer and social and environmental justice activist, working specifically on the issue of climate justice and extractivism through the lens of eco-feminism. Lynda defined 'extractivism' as the 'high-intensity, export-orientated extraction of common ecological goods rooted in colonialism and the notion that humans are separate from, and superior to, the rest of the living world.' This process has profoundly gendered impacts, as inequality is fostered by colonialism, causing negative impacts in the domestic sphere as well as the public sphere. For example, women are more likely to be in caring roles, and air pollution impacts the ability of women to provide this care, as it can cause key resources such as water to become unsafe to consume.

Lynda furthered the point raised by V'cenza that the inequality and exploitation of women in our society has the same roots as the climate and ecological crisis, namely: dualism, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Lynda eloquently explained that the climate crisis is a consequence/symptom of a system that needs to exploit, consume and pollute in order to survive. Therefore, in order to address these issues, it is essential that the structures and systems which uphold them are directly targeted. This means climate justice efforts should not only be about reducing levels of carbon emissions in our atmosphere, but should be about addressing issues such as food sovereignty, industrial agriculture, reclaiming the commons (water, energy, social care), creating sustainable local economies, community wealth building, redistributing wealth to the global south, and moving away from GDP as a measure of society's success, which are all symptoms of the same problematic structures.

Lynda also furthered the concern raised by Rachel, that Northern Ireland is yet to introduce a single piece of climate legislation, and called on activists to keep up the pressure on elected officials to see the recent Private Member's Bill on Climate Justice be made law. Environmental activism is a profoundly global movement, and Lynda pointed to the importance of international solidarity in challenging the problematic systems which uphold gender inequality and destruction of nature. Further, Lynda raised the point that efforts towards tackling climate change cannot simply take the form of switching to renewable energies, as this will continue to negatively impact the environment; rather, we need to drastically alter our levels of extraction, consumption and waste.

Following the three presentations from our speakers, a short question and answer discussion followed, giving participants the opportunity to converse with the panel about issues relating to gender inequality and climate justice. A strong theme which emerged from these discussions was the need to increase solidarity among groups working in these areas to strengthen activism efforts and achieve positive change. A commitment was made by all speakers to strengthen these activist networks and work together to bring about this change. In terms of directing this activism, emphasis was put on the need to directly target big corporations, who are some of the worst contributors to the climate crisis. Worryingly, just 100 fossil fuel companies are responsible for 70% of carbon emissions around the world. Notably, the key decision-makers in these companies are usually men, meaning that women's

voices are largely excluded from their decision-making processes. Each of the speakers agreed on the need to target these individual actors but also to be strategic in targeting the patriarchal capitalist systems and structures in which these corporations exist. Therefore, in order to take power away from capitalism, emphasis must be put on striving for worker-controlled economies, which recognise and respect the rights of all workers in an environmentally sensitive and feminist way.

This Webinar on Climate Justice as a Feminist Issue was highly inspiring, informative and constructive; and was a wonderful end to what has been an excellent series of events exploring different issues from the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan. Thank you to all of our speakers and to everyone who attended this series of Webinars!