



WRDA Stormont and Westminster Update – May 2021

Summary

In May 2021, there have been a number of political developments surrounding three of the thematic issues highlighted within the [Women's Policy Group \(WPG\) Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#). This summary reflects Bills and oral questions answered by both the Stormont and Westminster Executives, alongside consultation responses from the Women's Policy Group and briefing reports from WRDA.

The issue of **women's economic justice** has featured prominently at Stormont this month, particularly during Question Time. The importance of debt advice services, mitigation payments, workers' rights, and benefits featured prominently particularly during the Department of Communities Question Time. Similarly, oral questions at Westminster highlighted the importance of the £20 uplift payment in combatting economic inequalities and financial difficulties.

The issue of **violence against women and girls** featured prominently in both questions directed towards both the Home Secretary of the UK and Northern Ireland Justice Minister. Legislation such as the Protection from Stalking Bill, the review of non-fatal strangulation, and the Gillan Review investigating sexual offences in Northern Ireland are crucial legislative instruments to combat gendered criminal offences.

The issue of **reproductive health** and **access to abortion** featured prominently this month in Sinead McLaughlin's question to the Health Minister Robin Swann, and non-Executive Bills proposed by Clare Bailey and Paul Givan. The WPG's consultation response to Paul Givan's attempt to restrict abortion access is also included.

Courtney Girvin (WRDA volunteer) building upon the incredible work of previous WRDA volunteer Niamh Oddy

Stormont

Bills – May 2021

Issue	Proposed by	Stage	Comments	Links to the feminist recovery plan
Protection from Stalking Bill	Naomi Long-Minister for Justice	Committee Stage	<p>A Bill to provide protection from threatening or abusive behaviour, and from stalking.</p> <p>The new legislation will have greater and more appropriate penalties and protections from stalking behaviour compared to current harassment legislation. The introduction of stalking protection orders (SPOs) will enable the police to intervene prior to any conviction to address stalking behaviours before they become entrenched or escalate in severity so as to protect victims quickly when there is an immediate risk of harm.</p> <p>The Bill is divided into three parts. Part 1 creates a new specific offence of stalking, and creates the offence of threatening and abusive behaviour, which can be triggered by a single incident. Part 2 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 an inherently gendered crime, with women representing a disproportionate number of victims. Stalking commonly happens within a context of domestic abuse and is linked to elements of coercive control.</p> <p>Link to information on the Bill here.</p> <p>Link to the WPG Joint Evidence Submission to the Justice Committee on the Protection from Stalking Bill is available here.</p> <p>Several members of the WPG have also presented oral evidence to the Justice Committee on the Bill. Rachel Powell and Elaine Crory (WRDA) both presented evidence on behalf of WRDA, the WPG and Raise Your Voice on Thursday 27th May which can be viewed here from 3:12:28.</p>

Non-Executive Bills – May 2021

Issue	Proposed by	Stage (as of date of writing)	Comments	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Safe Access Zones Bill (Public Health and Well Being Bill)	Clare Bailey MLA, (Green Party NI – South Belfast)	Consultation carried forward from previous mandate.	This Bill aims to provide safe access to healthcare facilities including buffer zones around reproductive healthcare facilities.	This would enhance the ability of women and others to access healthcare services without fear of harassment and intimidation. Link to information on the Bill can be found here .
Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill	Paul Givan MLA, (DUP – Lagan Valley)	Second Stage	<p>A Bill attempting to restrict access to abortion by amending the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 to remove the ground for abortion in cases of severe non-fatal fetal disability.</p> <p>There has been no public consultation for this Bill, and it should be noted that the Northern Ireland Office conducted a public consultation when developing abortion law reform which resulted in the current 2020 legislation.</p> <p>The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has stated that this Bill is incompatible with human rights. The NIHRC submission to the committee can be found here.</p>	<p>This would infringe upon the bodily autonomy of women and other potential pregnant people, and violate the reproductive justice principle of the right to not have a child.</p> <p>Link to information on the Bill to here.</p> <p>The WPG Joint Response to the Bill can be found here.</p>
Climate Change Bill	Clare Bailey MLA, (Green Party NI – South Belfast)	Second Stage	A Bill attempting to mitigate the effects of climate change in Northern Ireland. The Bill seeks to establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for NI, establish an NI Climate Commissioner and resultant Climate Office, achieve a climate sustainable economy by 2045, and guarantee existing climate and environmental protections.	The move to a “Green Economy” and more environmentally sustainable job market is reflected within the FRP. The effects of climate change and its damaging effects are

			<p>This Bill would declare a climate emergency until the threshold of the global temperature as defined by the Paris Agreement has been met.</p>	<p>disproportionately gendered globally.</p> <p>Link to information on the Bill to here.</p> <p>The WPG Key Briefing on Climate Justice can be found here. The WPG also responded to the DAERA Minister’s Climate Change Discussion document endorsing the Climate Change Bill instead, which can be found here.</p>
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Questions asked - tabled during May 2021

Issue	Date	Asked by:	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Misogyny and Sexism in Public Life	04/05/21	Philip McGuigan (Sinn Fein – North Antrim) To Michelle O’Neill, deputy First Minister	<p>The Question: “Does the DFM agree that misogyny and sexism in public life are totally unacceptable and are a deterrent to women in public life.”</p> <p>To Michelle O’Neill, deputy First Minister</p> <p>Recognition of the common experience of misogynistic comments directed to many of the female MLAs including herself and Arlene Foster. All political parties must realise that misogynistic abuse contributes to the reluctance of women to engage in public political life, which impacts the representativeness of the Executive and Legislative bodies.</p>	<p>FRP seeks to address obstacles to participation in public life which includes the online abuse disproportionately directed towards women political and public representatives.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>

			Must have zero tolerance to misogyny and any other discriminatory practices. Political leaders have a responsibility to lead and speak out against it whenever it is visible in society.	
Funding to Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service	10/05/21	William Humphrey (DUP – North Belfast) To Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	The Question: “Will the Minister match the funding provided by Belfast City Council to the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service.” The Minister stated that there is no reduction in the budget for advice services including for appeals and tribunal representation. Her department is investing £6.4 million this year into appeals and debt services. Funding is ringfenced for advice services, however, it is up to Belfast City Council is ultimately responsible for decisions on how it allocates said funding.	Belfast Citywide Tribunals service provides individuals with free, confidential, and independent advice; this is essential in tackling women’s poverty, financial vulnerability, and the increasing demand as a result of the pandemic. Link to full answer here
Funding to Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service – Deloitte Report	10/05/21	Kellie Armstrong (Alliance – Strangford) To Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	The Question: “Deloitte report (2016) confirmed that a new funding model was needed for the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service. What actions have you taken to implement those recommendations, and ensure that there is not a postcode lottery across Northern Ireland and that those recommendations will be aligned across all council areas?” Minister recognises the importance of intersectionality (such as class and where you live) in the creation of additional barriers to accessing advice services, and the need to access such services. She commits to working with Belfast City Council is ensuring any and all barriers to access are removed.	Advice sector is important in tackling women’s poverty, financial vulnerability, and the increasing demand as a result of the pandemic. Importance of intersectionality and how class identity impacts access and need for advice services. Link to full answer here
PIP (Personal Independence Payments) Appeals Hearings	10/05/21	Liz Kimmins (Sinn Fein – Newry and Armagh) To	The Question: “How is the Minister ensuring those currently going through the appeals process are not suffering financially?” Minister assures that mitigation payments are continuing for those awaiting the outcome of the appeals process, encouraging those	Importance of mitigation payments continuing to fight against accruing debt and financial difficulty as a protective measure.

		Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	<p>experiencing financial hardship to contact independent advice services.</p> <p>Backlog of hearings in part caused by suspension of face-to-face hearings resultant from COVID-19. The department is rolling out pilots in relation to telephone assessments and other virtual assessments.</p>	<p>FRP emphasises the importance of extending such measures to prevent against a 'cliff-edge' for when people must deal with the backlog of debt.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
Universal Credit – Legacy Claimants	10/05/21	Martina Anderson (Sinn Fein – Foyle) To Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	<p>The Question: “Can the Minister give assurance that those being transferred from legacy benefits to Universal Credit will have transitional protections?”</p> <p>The Minister asserted that while there are those who will be better off financially from the move to Universal Credit, they are looking at transitional protections for those moving from legacy benefits. This will play a part in the transitional assessment that her department is looking at, details of what the transitional assessment will look like will be released soon.</p>	<p>The FRP recognises that Universal Credit is one of the key benefits and has a range of recommendations which would ensure that it better supports claimants.</p> <p>Link to recommendations here</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
Poverty Alleviation	10/05/21	Gary Middleton (DUP – Foyle) To Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	<p>The Question: “What does the Minister plan to do to tackle poverty levels – 400,000 people across NI are living in poverty.”</p> <p>The Minister recognised poverty has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Minister is working on an anti-poverty strategy as part of New Decade New Approach. Has designed a co-design group working with poverty experts and community organisations. Also established a departmental working group as poverty is not a single department issue.</p> <p>This strategy will then open for public consultation, hoping for sign-off and approval in December.</p>	<p>The FRP recognises the importance of poverty as a key concern of economic justice.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>

Social Housing	10/05/21	Maoliosa McHugh (Sinn Fein – West Tyrone) To Deirdre Hargey, Minister for Communities	<p>The Question: “Could the Minister outline her plans for increasing social housing”</p> <p>There are huge changes relating to revitalising the Housing Executive, such as ensuring it deals with its historic debt issues. The department will soon consult on a housing supply strategy, right to buy and ring fencing.</p>	<p>Having a strong social housing system which can meet the demands of those who need it is an essential aspect of fighting the decommodification of housing and removes significant rent pressures off those most vulnerable in society.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
Economic Recovery Action Plan	10/05/21	Gary Middleton (DUP – Foyle) To Diane Dodds, Minister for the Economy	<p>The Question: “Can the Minister provide an update on the economic recovery plan?”</p> <p>The Minister secured an extra £286-288 million in 2021-22 to help deliver the plan.</p> <p>The Minister has published the options consultation on a new energy strategy as part of the green economy. The development of additional upskilling and reskilling interventions is also under way. That is particularly important when we consider those who are still on furlough or still have their employment supported through the self-employed scheme.</p>	<p>The government economic recovery plan elucidates what the NI government is prioritising in contrast to the FRP.</p> <p>The attention to green energy and potentially green jobs is a shared theme of the FRP.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
Workers’ Rights: New Deal New Approach (NDNA) Commitment	10/05/21	Jemma Dolan (Sinn Fein – Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	<p>The Question: “NDNA contains commitments on workers’ rights, including ways to create decent jobs that give workers a meaningful voice and input into government policy development, how will she ensure that that commitment is delivered on, in cooperation with trade unions and workers’ representatives.”</p>	<p>The FRP highlights the importance of employment protections for mothers and fathers who will undoubtedly be affected by the Parental Bereavement Bill.</p>

			<p>The Minister has just signed the final draft of the Parental Bereavement leave Bill, an important piece of legislation which will give parents statutory rights during a difficult and sensitive time. Further, workers' rights will be implemented after this first aspect of legislation.</p>	<p>Further, the FRP recognises the importance of trade unions and workers' representatives in protecting against exploitative practices. The WPG also responds to a consultation on work-life balance which can be found here. In addition, the WPG Key Briefing on Women's Workers' Rights can be found here.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
<p>Truth and Recovery for Victims of Mother and Baby Homes</p>	<p>17/05/21</p>	<p>Sinead Bradley (SDLP – South Down) To Arlene Foster, First Minister</p>	<p>The Question: “An update on the progress on the anticipated timeline for reporting on the truth and recovery design team who are charged with establishing the terms of reference for the victims centred around the mother and baby homes.”</p> <p>A panel of experts is being set up to engage with the victims so they can moderate it in a way that is truly co-designed. The First Minister hopes it will result in an inquiry that the victims want and need.</p> <p>The First Minister has had some preliminary discussion with church and institutional leaders in relation to scope of an inquiry and access to documents and relevant data. The First Minister acknowledged the importance of working with the Republic of Ireland to access documents not currently within our jurisdiction to ensure a full truth recovery can occur.</p>	<p>The mother and baby institutions which existed in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was an inherently gendered abuse and trauma which was reinforced by gendered stereotypes and assumptions such as fallen women.</p> <p>Victims and survivors, and their families deserve the truth of the institutional abuse that occurred; future generations deserve to be free from the repetition of similar gendered violence.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>

Telemedicine and Abortion Access	18/05/21	Sinead McLaughlin (SDLP – Foyle) To Robin Swann, Health Minister	<p>The Question: “What actions has the Minister taken to provide early medical abortion services in the Western Health and Social Services Trust?”</p> <p>The Minister asserts his department is not required to commission abortion services. In recognition of the UK government introducing regulations from March 2020 the Health Department commenced work to develop a commissioning model on service specification for abortion services to be delivered in Northern Ireland. This work was paused as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The Western Health and Social Services Trust is currently recruiting to fill the vacant spot as far as the Minister is aware.</p>	<p>Access to abortion services is an inherently gendered experience. As Sinead McLaughlin asserted to expect women and pregnant people to travel during a pandemic to receive routine healthcare is fundamentally wrong and in contradiction to their equality and human rights.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>
Non-fatal Strangulation	24/05/21	Sinead Ennis (Sinn Fein – South Down) To Naomi Long, Justice Minister	<p>The Question: “To ask the Minister of Justice for an update on the review of the law on non-fatal strangulation offences.”</p> <p>Following the 2019 recommendation for the criminal justice inspector for NI that the department consider how to address potential inadequacies in the law around strangulation, the department commissioned a review of non-fatal strangulation offences during the summer of 2020, the scope was extended to include the so-called rough sex defence.</p> <p>The department looked at other legislation and juridical developments locally and internationally. The review team is now finalising a report for public consultation on non-fatal strangulation offences. The consultation will be launched in the coming weeks.</p>	<p>Strangulation is high-risk indicator in domestic abuse cases which result in homicide but the offence is routinely under-prosecuted and is often only charged as common assault.</p> <p>Strangulation is a gendered form of violence as women are more likely to be killed from strangulation than men.</p> <p>Further, the WPG response to the “Rough Sex” defence can be found here.</p> <p>Link to full answer here</p>

Serious Sexual Offences Cases	24/05/21	Daniel McCrossan (SDLP – West Tyrone) To Naomi Long, Justice Minister	<p>The Question: “To ask the Minister of Justice for an update on her plans to enhance the existing protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years.”</p> <p>The Minister is committed to implement the full programme of reforms under the Gillen Review into law and to improving the experiences of victims and survivors of these horrendous offences within the criminal justice system.</p> <p>She particularly recognises the vulnerability of victims who are children, therefore, her department is establishing a cross-departmental steering group to oversee and coordinate the full implementation of the Gillen Review recommendations specific to child victims. One element of this work is to ensure a permanent protocol to build upon the judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13.</p>	<p>The Gillen Review investigated the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Sexual offences are inherently gendered crimes, and it is important to recognise the intersectionality and increasing vulnerability of certain victims such as those children under the age of 13.</p> <p>Link to full answer here and to the Gillen Review here</p>
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Consultations

Issue	Women’s Policy Group response (WPG)	Link to Feminist Recovery plan
PSNI Consultation and Equality Impact Assessment on the temporary use of Spit and Bite Guards	<p>The WPG would endorse the consultation response from member organisation Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) to the PSNI public consultation on the equality impact assessment on the temporary use of spit and bite guards.</p> <p>The WPG shares CAJ’s raised concerns on the adverse effects on vulnerable populations such as children and young people, and disabled people. Therefore, CAJ and the WPG recommend the discontinuation of spit and bite guards immediately.</p>	<p>The FRP recognises the importance of intersectionality and other marginalised identities such as those with disabilities.</p> <p>The FRP is committed to ensuring that discrimination, violence, and abuse against people who are disabled is stopped.</p>

		Read the full response here .
Joint Evidence Submission to the Health Committee Severe Fetal Impairment Private Members Bill	<p>Many members of the WPG have been campaigning for access to abortion and reproductive justice for years, and it is extremely disheartening that there remains extremely limited access to abortion services in NI and further attempts to restrict such access. While this Bill is being considered women and pregnant people are being forced to travel to access services during a global pandemic.</p> <p>The UK and therefore NI is party to the European Convention of Human Rights, in cases where abortion is lawful (as has been since the decriminalisation in October 2019) but restricted the European Court found this to violate Articles 85 and 36. Further, international human rights frameworks such as CEDAW and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which the UK is party to, outlined the importance of safe and legal abortion as a human rights concern.</p>	<p>This Bill would infringe upon the bodily autonomy of women and pregnant people, and violate the reproductive justice principle of the right to not have a child.</p> <p>Read the full response here.</p>

[Westminster](#)

[Bills May 2021](#)

Issue	Date	Sponsored by	Stage	Notes	Links to Feminist Recovery Plan
Police, Crime and sentencing Bill	12/05/21	Robert Buckley, Ministry for Justice	Committee Stage (House of Commons)	<p>A Bill to make provision about the police and other emergency workers; to make provision about collaboration between authorities to prevent and reduce serious violence; to make provision about the powers of the police and other authorities for the purposes of preventing, detecting, investigating or prosecuting crime or investigating other matters; to make provision about the maintenance of public order; to make provision about sentencing, detention, release, management and rehabilitation of offenders; etc.</p> <p>This bill has been controversial as it is seen as an attack on the right to protest as is reflected in the second stage debate.</p>	<p>This is a very broad Bill covering a range of topics including gender and sexual based violence. However, the right to protest has also been essential in furthering women's legislation.</p> <p>Read full details of the Bill here.</p>

				<p>It has also been highlighted that the bill deals with duties to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence. Specifically, it places a legal duty on local authorities, police, criminal justice agencies, health authorities, fire and rescue services and others to collaborate through sharing data and intelligence with one another. The debate highlighted how important it is that the impact of violence by men against women, particularly domestic violence and sexual violence, controlling and coercive behaviour by men and the impact on the community are included in that strategy to reduce violence against women and girls.</p>	
<p>Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill</p>	<p>12/05/21</p>	<p>Brandon Lewis, Ministry for Northern Ireland Office</p>	<p>Second Reading (House of Commons)</p>	<p>A Bill to make provision about Ministerial appointments, extraordinary Assembly elections, the Ministerial Code of Conduct and petitions of concern in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>This Bill will deliver aspects of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement which was agreed by the five main NI political parties in January 2020. The Bill is concerned with the sustainability and transparency of the Northern Ireland institutions.</p> <p>Some key changes include requiring petitioners to come from more than one Northern Irish political party and updating the code of conduct for Northern Ireland Ministers.</p>	<p>These new provisions reform the Petition of Concern mechanism in order to reduce its use (and return it to its intended purpose which was to ensure that all sections of the community are protected).</p> <p>Previously the Petition of Concern has been abused and used to block socially progressive legislation such as equal marriage. Such reforms go some ways in ensuring one party cannot override the democratic process.</p>

					Read full details of the Bill here.
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Questions asked tabled during May 2021

Issue	Date	Proposed by	Notes	Link to Feminist Recovery Plan
Increases in Standard Allowances for Universal Credit and Tax Credits	17/05/21	Hannah Bardell MP (SNP – Livingston) and Allan Dorans MP (SNP – Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) To Will Quince, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.	<p>The Question: “What recent assessment has the Minister and government made of the potential effect of removing the £20 uplift to universal credit on recipients of that benefit? Will the Minister extend the uplift to other legacy benefits?”</p> <p>In March, the government announced the extension of the £20 a week uplift to the recipients of Universal Credit and Tax Credits for a further six months. The focus now is on supporting people back to work.</p> <p>The position of the Work and Pensions Committee and 100 Conservative MPs in the Tory Reform group and one nation caucus are urging the government to make the £20 uplift permanent.</p>	<p>The FRP highlighted the importance of the £20 uplift as a matter of economic justice and emphasized the importance of this uplift being extended to legacy benefits.</p> <p>The government’s insistence on the move as a temporary measure and supporting people back to work is ignorant of the reality of increasing in-work poverty.</p> <p>Read the full debate here.</p>
Violence Against Women	17/05/21	Wera Hobhouse MP (Liberal Democrat – Bath) To Priti Patel, Secretary of State for the Home Department.	<p>The Question: “Following the murder of Sarah Everard and the outpouring of solidarity calling for an end to all violence against women and girls, is it not time for the government to support the Our Streets Now campaign, which calls for public sexual harassment to be made a specific criminal offence?”</p> <p>The Minister supports an institutional overhaul to the government’s response to violence against women and girls. She asserts that no one should feel unsafe within the public space; believes the 2021</p>	<p>Violence in the public space, domestic violence and rape are inherently gendered crimes, with women representing a disproportionate number of victims.</p> <p>The death of Sarah Everard and solidarity from women</p>

			<p>Domestic Abuse Act will strength protections and have harsher penalties; recognises the insensitivity of the criminal justice system to the crime of sexual violence and rape and therefore promises a comprehensive rape review.</p> <p>The debate highlighted that rape convictions have fallen to an all-time low, with just 1 in every 100 reported rape cases making it in front of a court.</p>	<p>across the country illustrates how widespread misogyny and gendered violence is within the UK.</p> <p>Read the full debate here.</p>
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