



Northern Ireland
Women's European Platform

**Webinar series:
Achieving a gendered COVID-19 recovery:
leaving no one behind**

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis is fundamentally gendered, with women at risk economically, socially and in terms of their health and wellbeing. It's increasingly clear that the emergency is long term for many women. Without support and action, there are genuine risks to gender equality.

This webinar series is intended to provide a platform for exploring solutions and strategies for a feminist approach to the recovery phase and future. The series is intended to share learning and perspectives from across the UK and Ireland and beyond, but will focus on a Northern Ireland response. The crisis has shown new responses are possible, and our voices are more important than ever.

If not now, when?

Session 1: Where are the women? Tuesday 12 May 2020

Panellists:

Joanna Maycock, Secretary General, European Women's Lobby

Emma Ritch, Director, Engender

Emma Osborne, Member Services and Support, Women's Aid Federation NI

Session chair: Elizabeth Law, Chair, NIWEP

This session was designed to set the scene for the webinar series and the context for a feminist recovery from COVID-19. It explored the current impact of COVID-19 on women and the women's sector response, and also highlighted emerging responses and priorities for the recovery. NIWEP chair **Liz Law** introduced the context of the webinar and introduced NIWEP, and emphasised that the role of NIWEP is to contribute to advocacy and work to strengthen gender equality in Northern Ireland by creating a link to the UK/Ireland and international level.

Joanna Maycock started by acknowledging the scale of the changes since March. The European Women's Lobby (EWL) had been finalising a new strategic plan for 2020-25, but reconfiguration is now needed in light of the new circumstances. She emphasised that a major overhaul of policy and practice is needed, and that there is now a chance to rebuild society and economy, in a way that is based on solidarity, strengthens equality and values care work in all its forms. The women's sector is ready

The key messages from Joanna were:

- The crisis has hit women hard, with BAME, migrant and disabled women hardest hit
- EWL has developed a Call for a European Solidary Stimulus Plan¹ as a basis for recovery, based on a gender lens and including the principles of gender budgeting
- equality between women and men must be a focus of the response at all levels, and there must be gender mainstreaming in budgets at all levels: from EU budget to national and local stimulus packages
- Currently less than 2% of the EU cohesion funds are spent on women and girls; this needs to increase to ensure that EU funds are spent to advance equality between women and men, which is a key principle in the EU treaty.
- Violence against women and girls has been amplified by isolation and lockdown; compounded by the chronic underfunding of women's organisations providing essential support and services; effective and well resourced response is required
- Good practice has been emerging across Europe, for example pharmacies assisting women; hotels being used to house women fleeing violence

¹ Available at <https://www.womenlobby.org/>

- The EU Gender Equality Strategy is an opportunity and potentially an effective lever to ensure gender sensitive responses in recovery

Emma Ritch summarised the current situation in clear terms: the COVID-19 crisis has exposed cracks that were there for a long time, in relation to gender equality. Engender has focused on engaging with Scottish Government to ensure that women's equality and rights are part of the crisis response and also that the crisis cannot be used to step back from existing commitments to women's equality. Emma stressed that the focus post COVID-19 must be on gender, and austerity cannot be the answer to the economic challenges. Organisations and bodies in Scotland are converging to look at recovery, and Engender is involved in these networks.

Emma's key messages were:

- Engender has developed briefings² on the impact of COVID-19 on women and made recommendations to Scottish government, including on gender disaggregated data
- Close the Gap and Engender are creating principles for gender equal recovery
- Women's incomes have been scarred by a decade of austerity; inclusive growth must be the response to the economic challenge
- Inclusive growth must mean an inclusive process with understanding of gendered impacts and intersectionality, particularly lesbian, bisexual and trans, disabled and BAMER women
- Patterns of growth must change, to include women in the process of growth as well as having a share of its outputs
- Care system has been underpaid and undervalued; a care economy must be cornerstone for the future
- The same applies to undervalued work women undertake in retail, cleaning and other service roles
- Products and services must meet women's needs; example of PPE that does not fit women and puts them at risk
- Better data and measures are needed, including sex disaggregated data and measures based on climate justice and human rights
- Engender will be making a series of calls to Scottish Government around these issues

Emma Osborne highlighted the seriousness of the situation in relation to violence against women and girls: in Northern Ireland, three women have been murdered since lockdown began on 23 March, PSNI recorded a 10% increase in domestic abuse calls to 2,000 in the first three weeks, and calls to the Domestic Violence Helpline have increased by 40%. There has been no uplift in funding to the sector in Northern Ireland, as it is not provided for in the Barnett formula. Women's Aid NI is still supporting women, however, and is working towards strengthening support both in the short term and in the recovery phase.

Emma's highlights of the current situation and the way forward were:

² Available at <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/covid-19-and-womens-equality---rolling-blog/>

- The crisis has highlighted levels of violence more than ever before, in public and in policy debate
- Domestic abuse legislation is not yet in place, this creates some challenges in response
- Inaccurate messaging in media is unhelpful; perpetuates misconception of what domestic abuse is and what motivates it ('he just snapped')
- Good practice has developed that could be replicated in Northern Ireland, for example support through pharmacies in France and Spain
- Women's Aid Federation is looking at how to promote the service, which remains open, and exploring ways to secure additional funding for both the immediate and longer term, as demand is predicted to increase when lockdown starts to be lifted.
- Need a whole community response, including family, friends and neighbours supporting women and seeking advice on their behalf
- Support is available and will continue to be available

Discussion

The discussion took an optimistic tone and focused on small changes now for long term impact and highlighted potential for change, despite challenges. Liz noted that Brexit remains relevant and will have an impact on how information and innovation is shared. For example, the European Institute on Gender Equality (EIGE) has collated information on support for women and girls experiencing violence available in EU countries, but this now excludes the UK.

Small changes for long term change

This question asked if the panel is seeing evidence of small changes that could be sustained or developed to have a longer term impact. Joanna emphasised the importance of asking questions, and taking time to fully understand the different approaches of women and men. She stressed in particular the need to understand and record the time taken up by work women undertake but is not counted, including care work and especially emotional labour. Joanna also noted that during the crisis, most of the community and voluntary sector support developed has been initiated and organised by women, from providing access to food for vulnerable groups to organising logistic support for care workers.

Emma Osborne emphasised the need for community solidarity, in particular as women may avoid seeking help in the current circumstances for different reasons. Asked about potential delay to the Domestic Abuse Bill, she said the sector is hopeful there will be no delay. She also noted that while the proposal to use empty hotels to house women is in principle helpful, there are challenges in providing long term support as it will be a temporary solution. The sector focus is on sustainable housing solutions, including secure tenancies. There are currently reports of difficulties in this area, including cases where women have had difficulty securing the right to remain in the family home.

Emma Ritch highlighted the need to address the gap in perception versus reality. For example, it's reported that fathers take responsibility for home schooling, but what is the reality? Evidence from women indicates that the ultimate responsibility is displaced onto mothers, who must schedule their day and paid work around this, while fathers are able to prioritise paid work and other activities. Emma also called for a critical analysis of what the economy is for, and noted this is needed more than ever. As an example, she noted that care workers need

concrete action such as adequate pay and PPE, rather than clapping and platitudes about sacrifice and heroism.

Time for optimism

The final question asked if there is cause for optimism and evidence that the public tone is changing. Examples of significant shifts were noted, including comments in line with long term women's sector asks from public figures normally critical of gender equality. Emma Ritch agreed that there is an opportunity to take a new direction, and that the public mood is more open to change. The women's sector must keep focused and work together to ensure that the message gets heard properly. Emma stressed that the UK government also has a role to play and needs to act.

Joanna highlighted a collective vision being built at the European level, based on care, for each other, society and the planet. She emphasised that all current core issues globally are feminist issues, and EWL is involved in ensuring a feminist perspective. Joanna also identified the EU Gender Equality Strategy as a potential lever for change. This is a priority for EWL, which has a special focus within this on care for older people as a critical neglected issue. The Gender Pay Transparency Directive must be implemented and EWL is taking action on potential delay on this. In this regard, Liz as chair noted that NIWEP has written to the European Commission on this, as part of a campaign led by the European Trade Union Confederation.

Emma Osborne noted that the COVID-19 crisis has shone a light on violence against women and girls in an entirely new way, which makes it more difficult for policy makers to ignore victims and survivors. Emma agreed that a positive outcome is possible from the increased scrutiny, but this requires a sustained and shared approach across the sector.

The session concluded with Joanna confirmed the EWL position that EWL is a feminist European family and will always include the UK. Joanna emphasised that it is more important than ever to stand together in solidarity, share analysis and share experiences. This will be critical to efforts to create lasting change.

“Women are ready for change, and ready to lead that change”

Panellists:

Joanna Maycock, Secretary General, European Women's Lobby

EWL represents the diversity of the women's movement across Europe bringing an independent feminist voice and real women's voices into the EU political arena. Founded in 1990, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest alliance of over 2,000 women's non-governmental associations in the EU coming together to campaign for their common vision of a Feminist Europe. A lifelong feminist, Joanna has 20 years' experience in leadership positions in Civil Society.

Joanna is a leading figure in women's networks discussing women in leadership and feminist leadership in Brussels and was named one of the most influential women in Brussels by Politico newspaper in 2016, which described her as "A powerhouse on the Brussels NGO and political scene, (she) is in the vanguard of Brussels feminists, with an open line to leaders across the city". According to one of her peers, "She exercises influence and change even within structures where she does not have the hard power she has within the European Women's Lobby." In 2018, Joanna was named one of Apolitical's Top 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy.

Emma Ritch, Director, Engender

Emma is Engender's Executive Director, leading on strategic collaboration with our colleagues in the women's, equalities, and human rights sectors. She is also principally responsible for engagement with Scottish and UK Government, the UN, and the EU through the European Women's Lobby. She is engaged by all things feminist, but has particular interest in women and the economy, intersectionality, violence against women, and the relationship between women's equality and women's human rights.

Emma sits on a range of external working groups including the First Minister's Advisory Council on Women & Girls, the joint strategic board of Equally Safe, the Scottish National Action Plan for human rights leadership forum, the advisory group of the Scottish Women's Rights Centre and the Scottish Women's Budget Group. She chairs the Rape Crisis Scotland board, is vice-convenor of the board of Close the Gap, and is a member of the Scotland Committee of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Emma Osborne, Member Services and Support, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

Emma is the Membership Services and Support Worker at Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, supporting the organisation with policy, lobbying and communications. Before she began working for the organisation, she volunteered with them as part of the Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline, providing a listening ear and support for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse.