



Northern Ireland  
Women's European Platform

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

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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.

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***If not now, when?***

**Session 2: Caring for the future  
Thursday 11 June 2020**

**Panellists:**

**Mary Collins, Senior Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, European Women's Lobby**

**Professor Ann Marie Gray, School of Applied Social and Policy Science, Ulster University**

**Rachel Cable, Head of Oxfam Cymru**

**Session chair: Elizabeth Law, Chair, NIWEP**

This session was designed to focus on care as a specifically gendered issue and priority in the context of COVID-19. It summarised how the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted care and the value of care work in unprecedented ways, and explored ways to utilise the momentum to achieve change and create a care economy, as a basis for a new, more inclusive economic model. NIWEP chair **Liz Law** introduced the context of the webinar and introduced NIWEP, and emphasised that the webinar series is designed to support and inform work on feminist and gendered approaches to recovery, which is increasingly a priority particularly within the women's sector.

**Mary Collins** opened the session with an overview of Europe wide issues relating to care. Mary emphasised that there should be no 'going back to normal' and outlined work on a feminist economic model developed by the European Women's Lobby. [The Purple Pact](#)<sup>1</sup>, published in early 2020, puts care at the centre of the economy and also emphasises equally distributed care work. It calls for a Care Deal for Europe, which would involve investing in a care economy, equal parental leave and addressing gender pay and pension gaps.

Key messages highlighted by Mary included:

- Women carry the burden of care across Europe and constitute the vast majority of care workers, including roles such as cleaners
- Women across Europe as a whole undertake 13 hours more unpaid care than men per week 25% in precarious jobs Europe
- Older women are at greater risk, not only due to the greater risk from the virus for older people, but also due to lack of social contact, particularly in care homes
- Digital divide is creating additional barriers that will deepen inequalities if not addressed; this includes home schooling issues

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<sup>1</sup> European Women's Lobby (2020) [The Purple Pact](#)

- Limited information on violence against women aged over 65; this is an issue especially as older people are asked to shield and have even fewer opportunities than others to access external support
- Support mechanisms for older people and people with disabilities under strain
- Migrant and asylum seeking women particularly vulnerable as many services depend on legal status
- Good practice developing in a number of places:
  - Portugal has introduced temporary regularisation of status for migrants, similar approach in Italy
  - Sweden is developing outreach to women experiencing violence in rural areas, funding shelters
  - Part time paid parental leave schemes introduced for example in Belgium

**Rachel Cable** emphasised the importance of not going back to 'normal', but identifying a new, better way forward. Rachel stressed that this must be done quickly, as the crisis otherwise may have repercussions over decades to come. Rachel also emphasised that fundamental change is required to tackle poverty, which is linked to the undervaluing of care work, and cannot stop at existing initiatives such as proposals for a £500 additional payment to care workers.

#### Key messages

- 24% of people in Wales live in poverty; figure hasn't changed for 10 years
- Care work is chronically undervalued, which has an impact in particular on women's poverty;
- Women underrepresented in public decision making roles in Wales
- GDP can't be only measure of how successful societies are; need more holistic measures
- People need to be at the centre of the care system

**Prof Ann Marie Gray** focused her contribution on adult social care, which has put the situation in the sector under a spotlight. Ann Marie noted that care homes in particular have had longer term difficulties in accessing personal protective equipment and other resources, and stressed that there are serious questions about why adult social care was neglected even as there was significant investment in hospital services during COVID-19. Ann Marie stressed that fundamental change of how adult social care is organised across these islands is required to achieve change; specifically, outsourcing of provision to the private sector is a major issue. Her key message was that there is now an opportunity to create change, as the COVID-19 crisis has given unique visibility to the underfunding and wider neglect of the adult social care sector. The call from academics and others has been for a National Care Service integrated with the NHS, and evidence now shows there is public support for such a tax funded service.

Ann Marie highlighted a number of key messages:

- Nature of service users is at core of issue; many are older and most are vulnerable
- Nature of workforce is another core issue: mostly female, and many roles seen as unskilled work, leading to limited access to training and development; there is very poor data on the social care workforce
- Unpaid care work contributes £90bn to economy, but this is not counted in eg. GDP
- There is a significant difference in pay for care workers in the public and private sector, which affects staff recruitment and retention

- Little has been said about care work in recent reviews and papers commissioned by Northern Ireland government and civil service, but there is evidence that the public are in favour of a reformed system

## Discussion

### New models

The discussion initially explored the concept of wellbeing and a wellbeing economy. Rachel highlighted the Welsh [Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015](#)<sup>2</sup>, which she said has been helpful to civil society, as organisations have been able to frame conversations with decision makers in a new way. The question of smaller, incremental changes also arose, and it was suggested that the private sector system would be difficult to dismantle. Ann Marie noted that the system is in many ways dismantling itself, and that the crisis has highlighted the challenges that are driving this. Ann Marie highlighted the examples of Germany and Japan as models with potential learning for Northern Ireland, and as countries of interest to academics in this field. Both systems involve a cost to users, but enjoy public support as they developed from crises in social care. Rachel highlighted proposals for a social care 'levy' in Wales, designed to fund improvements to social care in Wales, but noted that this is unlikely to develop further before the Welsh Assembly elections in 2021.

### Closing remarks

Mary emphasised in her closing remarks that there is a lot of optimism, despite the challenges that have been compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. Mary highlighted New Zealand as a source of inspiration, not only as a country with a female leader but with a different focus; the budget in New Zealand is known as a wellbeing budget. Mary emphasised that to achieve change, a more holistic approach to budgeting than is customary in budgets in European countries is required.

Rachel highlighted three priorities for action. Firstly, it is essential to focus on issues at hand. The Welsh government appointed a [Fair Work Commission](#), which identified the poor conditions in the care sector as a key issue<sup>3</sup>, and Oxfam Cymru is involved in this area of work to highlight many of the issues raised in this session. It is also vital to hold decision makers to account, which Oxfam Cymru has been doing with WEN Wales through a [Feminist Scorecard for Wales](#)<sup>4</sup>. She repeated her call for developing measures beyond GDP to better demonstrate how value is created in society.

Ann Marie highlighted a standard model for social care work as a short term priority. This would involve investing in apprenticeships, which are currently significantly underfunded for example in comparison to apprenticeships in construction.

*“This is a watershed moment: we need a National Care Service”*

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<sup>2</sup> [Well-being of Future Generations Act \(Wales\) 2015](#)

<sup>3</sup> Fair Work Wales (2019) [Report of the Fair Work Wales Commission](#)

<sup>4</sup> Oxfam Cymru and WEN Wales (April 2020) [Feminist Scorecard 2020](#)

## Panellists

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### **Mary Collins, Senior Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, European Women's Lobby**

Mary Collins is Senior Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at the European Women's Lobby, where she has been working for a number of years. She works mainly on socio-economic issues relating to women's economic independence, including the gender pay, pension, poverty gaps, care, work-life-balance and EU2020 Strategy/European Semester from a gender perceptive. She coordinates the EWL feminist economics working group which recently published the [Purple Pact – a feminist approach to the economy](#).

### **Prof Ann Marie Gray, Ulster University**

Ann Marie Gray is Professor of Social Policy in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University and co-director of ARK ([www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)), a joint Ulster University/Queen's University Research Centre.

ARK is NI's Social Policy Information Hub and in line with ARK's mission to promote the accessibility and use of academic research she has worked closely with external organisations to increase the accessibility and impact of academic data. Her research interests are in the area of social care, devolution and Social Policy and gender and Social Policy. Current projects include ESRC funded work on abortion which included the first ever survey of public opinion in NI on this issue. Recent publications include co-authored books on governance and the delivery of welfare, transformations in social care and articles on Brexit and Devolution.

Ann Marie is chair of YouthAction Northern Ireland.

### **Rachel Cable, Head of Oxfam Cymru**

Rachel shapes and leads an integrated programme challenging poverty in Wales. Rachel oversees Oxfam Cymru's policy, advocacy, campaigns and communications in Wales, as well as our programme activity. She brings a strong commitment to social justice to Oxfam Cymru's work to end poverty and suffering, locally and globally, making this central to public and political life in Wales. Rachel also plays a leading role within the Disasters Emergency Committee in Wales.

Prior to taking up the role of Head of Oxfam Cymru, Rachel worked as a Policy and Advocacy Officer for the charity, writing policy papers, contributing evidence to enquiries, and extending the influence of Oxfam and its partners to bring about positive change. Before she joined Oxfam, Rachel worked for Universities Wales, as well as sitting on the Board of Trustees of the University of South Wales Students' Union.

Outside of work, Rachel is passionate about Cardiff, and led the campaign to save Cardiff's Vulcan Hotel, which is now being rebuilt at Wales' National History Museum at St Fagan's.