



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 3: Leadership for new economic realities  
Tuesday 30 June 2020**

**Panellists:**

**Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, Women's Budget Group**

**Dr Angela O'Hagan, WISE Centre, Glasgow Caledonian University**

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

This session looked at institutional mechanisms, leadership and tools needed to underpin a gender responsive recovery from COVID-19, including economic models being developed to ensure a gender lens is integrated across public policy. This session was intended to begin looking at the policy level actions required for change, and the tools that can support that change.

**NIWEP chair Liz Law** opened the session with an overview of the role of NIWEP and the previous sessions. Liz highlighted the aim of the series to explore options and opportunities for policy change, in light of the dramatic and uniquely gendered impacts that the COVID-19 crisis has had across the world. These are not yet included in recovery plans to date, and therefore it will be essential to identify key messages from the webinar series and share these with policy and decision makers. Liz also noted that the Women's Policy Group is developing a feminist recovery plan and NIWEP is involved in this work.

**Mary-Ann Stephenson** sparked off the session and noted the speech by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on economic recovery given earlier on the day of the session. Mary-Ann noted that women have been heavily impacted and are overrepresented in the sectors most affected and likely to emerge smaller from the crisis. Mary-Ann also noted a survey undertaken by Turn2Us, which indicates that over 40% of lone parents expect to be living on less than £500 a month. Care work has already been highlighted as a core issue, and childcare is likely to be a challenge for many mothers and families as lockdown is rolled back and workers are expected to return to their workplaces. Mary-Ann noted in particular the pressure from ongoing disruption and mixing work and care responsibilities as a burden affecting primarily women. She also noted that a two tier return to work is now a real risk, where those with caring responsibilities are disadvantaged with potential long term impacts.<sup>1</sup>

Mary-Ann underlined that the focus in investment has, as before, tended to be on construction and men in hard hats, while care work has been shown to bring greater returns on investment. She emphasised that serious proposals should undergo equality impact assessment to demonstrate that proposals have been fully analysed to ensure they will bring an effective return on investment. Equality impact assessment would identify the people hardest hit and

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<sup>1</sup> Henau E & de Himmelweit, J (June 2020) [A care led recovery from coronavirus](#). London: Women's Budget Group

sectors with most of return on investment, and therefore ensure decision making is evidence based.

**Angela O'Hagan** gave an overview of Scottish economic policy, as a context for developments and proposals relating to COVID-19 recovery. She highlighted that gender analysis forms part of the Scottish budgetary process, and has been incorporating equality analysis for over 20 years.<sup>2</sup> Wellbeing has been an aim of the Scottish Government Economic Strategy since 2015. While there are a number of positive drivers, with consistent political statements on the centrality of equality and human rights in policy making and policy related to post COVID decision-making. While this framework is in many ways positive and supports a gender responsive approach, this has not yet translated into a gender focus in the COVID-19 response and recovery.

Angela outlined the response from the women's sector and feminist organisations in Scotland to the recovery plans, which has focused on emphasising a care economy as a core element in the "[9 Principles for Gender-led Economic Recovery](#)"<sup>3</sup>. The response has to date been disappointing on the care economy, with the opportunity for investment in care as essential infrastructure missing from care when other issues such as investment in apprenticeships and support for the creative sectors have seen more specific recommendations. It appears that the focus on gender and equality continues to lack consistent understanding and application, resulting in concrete action, which now is more necessary than ever to ensure women's role in the economy is strengthened, rather than a situation where women's rights are rolled back.

Angela stressed that investment in a care economy is essential for the recovery, as well as in building a resilient, sustainable future economy. She also supported the argument developed by Mary-Ann, and called for a wider understanding of recovery than the 'build, build, build' picture currently being vocally emphasised by the UK Government.

## Discussion

The initial discussion explored the reasons behind the initial economy recovery responses. Mary-Ann highlighted the unhelpful concept of 'real work' and noted that it is understood as work men do, while women's work is sentimentalised as work done for emotional reasons. This would, for example, explain the lack of investment in care, as it is understood as work women do in any case 'out of the goodness of their hearts'. There was also concern expressed over Cabinet Ministers' understanding of how society and the welfare system functions, which may impact how decisions around recovery are made. Angela noted that equality policy is also seen as separate from, rather than integral to, mainstream policy such as economic policy, and this has a very significant impact on how resources are targeted. She added that there is a distinct lack of understanding of the lived experience of those hardest hit by the crisis, which also impacts on decision making.

Gender budgeting was discussed as a concept and a practical tool for decision making. It was stressed that gender budgeting is not about a separate or special budget for women, but a form of policy and decision making that scrutinises expenditure and its differential impacts on women and men, to help highlight what policies contribute to equality. Questions arose regarding the appetite for gender budgeting in Northern Ireland and the range of reasons that might affect this.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/>

<sup>3</sup> Engender and Close the Gap (June 2020) [9 Principles for Gender-led Economic Recovery](#)

Intersectionality was raised as a major issue that is routinely overlooked and not understood in decision making. It was stressed that ongoing effort and a vocal approach is required to ensure that gender equality including an intersectional approach is integrated into economic debate. It was also noted that there are complex reasons why intersectionality and equality are absent in debate, and that this needs to be challenged. In Northern Ireland, this includes the contested nature of equality, and the dominance of 'traditional' issues including constitutional perspectives.

Equality impact assessments and the merits and disadvantages of these were explored, including the current limited application of the tool in the policy making process. Angela noted that this has been extensively discussed, but that equality remains a secondary or tertiary issue and this is why equality impact assessments are viewed negatively. Poor process is another issue; often assessments are tasked late in the day to junior officials to undertake, without a clear steer on how to undertake an assessment. There are also limitations in how findings are translated into policy recommendations and action. Angela gave an example of a recent assessment that identified recipients across protected characteristics, did this did not lead to any concrete proposals for how to address issues of under-representation and some people not being reached by the policy they should be benefitting from. The process requires change to ensure this is dealt with more effectively.

It was also highlighted that there are differences in how devolved administrations deal with economic decision making, and that a common argument against use of such tools is that decisions are made centrally at Westminster level. Angela noted it is important to look at where competencies are to ensure effective decision making. Mary-Ann noted that these are devolved decisions, but the difficulty is that any lack of clarity can be used to question and circumvent use of decision making tools such as gender budgeting. For example, participants cited examples where officials articulated that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act Northern Ireland prevents gender analysis, because this would be discriminatory against other protected groups.

## **Closing remarks**

Mary-Ann stressed that effective equality impact assessment needs to start very early in the process, rather than operate almost as an add-on, as at present. She noted that the impacts of COVID-19 were predictable with the evidence available before the crisis, but that political will is required to address the real issues underlying existing inequalities. In particular, a human rights framework is needed to frame discourse and ensure the crisis is not used to roll back equality and human rights provisions.

Angela supported Mary-Ann's analysis. She suggested that concepts can be difficult to define, and that clear terminology and legislation is essential to ensure equality impact assessment can be effective and is not used in a limiting way. Angela stressed that while training is needed, the core issue the core issues of will and commitment need to be addressed.

*"We have the tools, we need  
decision makers to want to act"*

## Panellists

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### **Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, Women's Budget Group**

Mary-Ann has worked for women's equality and human rights for over twenty years as a campaigner, researcher and trainer. She was previously Director of the Fawcett Society and a Commissioner on the Women's National Commission. She is a founder member of Coventry Women's Voices and a board member at Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre. She has a PhD in Law from the University of Warwick.

### **Dr Angela O'Hagan, Glasgow Caledonian University**

Angela O'Hagan is a Reader in Equalities and Public Policy at Glasgow Caledonian University where she is also Deputy Director of the WISE Centre for Economic Justice. Angela is Chair of the Scottish Government's Equality and Budgets Advisory Group, sits on the Commission for a Gender Equal Economy and a member of the UK Women's Budget Group. She has been Convenor of the Scottish Women's Budget Group and closely involved in the Group since its creation 20+ years ago. Angela recently prepared a report on gender budgeting for the Welsh Government with the Wales Centre for Public Policy, and was a member of the Budget Review Group on revising the Scottish Budget process that reported in 2017. Currently Angela is a member of the newly formed Scottish Government Social Renewal Advisory Board, and a non-party member of the SNP Commission on Fairness and Social Justice.