



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.

Session 4: The B word: What next for rights and equality?

Thursday 8 October, 1-2pm

Panellists:

Dr Rachel Minto, Cardiff University

Louise Coyle, NI Rural Women's Network

Tara Farrell, Longford Women's Link

Session chair: Elizabeth Law, Chair of NIWEP

Brexit has happened - how do we secure rights for women and gender equality?

This webinar explored the current position with regard to post Brexit arrangements from a women's perspective, and aimed to identify key directions for action for the women's sector in the new arrangements that will come into place from January 2021.

NIWEP chair Liz Law opened the session with an overview of recent developments in relation to both Brexit and COVID-19, and summarised the previous sessions held earlier in the year in the webinar series. Liz highlighted the aim of the series to explore options and opportunities for policy change, in light of the major developments relating to post Brexit arrangements. These have not necessarily been reflected 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 has now published the Feminist Recovery Plan and work to highlight its asks and advocate for implementation is particularly important in the current circumstances.

Rachel Minto focused her contribution on key issues for the future from a UK wide perspective, also noting the significance of the EU in providing distinct opportunities for organisations from the devolved level. She highlighted current research looking at civil society and Brexit at Cardiff University, which has explored civil society and the implications of Brexit. Rachel stressed that the future is likely to hold a mixture of continuity and change for UK based actors' continued participation within European networks, and that the situation is significant for gender equality. Organisations such as the European Women's Lobby has been very keen to ensure continued links, and changed its internal rules to enable the UK to remain a member post Brexit. However, domestically organisations must decide their own direction and focus and the "relevance" of these European networks in future.

Rachel highlighted data as a second key focus area, which will be important for profiling and benchmarking the UK. Until now, significant data in key areas including violence against women and girls has been shared with the EU and contributed to EU wide data sets, where the UK can be pegged against other EU Member States. Now, there is a risk that the UK will drift away from these European norms of equality as well as the legislative frameworks and the impact of this, while still unknown, will likely be significant for gender equality within the UK.

Louise Coyle shared the perspective of women NI Rural Women's Network has engaged with and stressed that the issues have not changed since the referendum. Above all, women's voices are underrepresented, as has been the case since well before the referendum, and there is limited willingness to take views on board. The lack of a sitting Assembly and Executive further reduced representation of Northern Ireland in the period following the referendum and the withdrawal negotiations. Louise noted that the lack of clarity has contributed to difficulty in identifying concrete action on the issues.

Louise noted that women's rights significantly draw on European legislation and emphasised that these rights cannot be taken for granted, but must be secured in the future. This means that continued collaboration with women and women's organisations is essential to make sure women's voices are heard. It is also essential to continue advocating for full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, as it plays a key role in women's everyday lives and their ability to live their lives peacefully. Centrally, it guarantees equal rights to people of both British and Irish nationality, and this is a key issue that Brexit will impact on as demonstrated through recent court cases and other developments. In this regard, a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland would be significant and go a long way towards securing rights and alleviating current concerns. Louise stressed that holding decision makers to account is critical to safeguarding rights and securing implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, and collaboration across civil society is essential to effectively ensure accountability. All of these actions do not provide guarantees, but can help ensure women's rights and gender equality are not rolled back.

Tara Farrell started by introducing Longford Women's Link and its specific interest in cross border collaboration, including east west collaboration. Tara highlighted involvement in the New Common Charter work, and echoed previous speakers to emphasise the importance of collaboration within the sector. She stressed that the current situation underlines the need for dialogue and conversations to identify shared interests and also practical implications of current proposed legislation, which will have impacts for example for women on the island of Ireland fleeing violence and seeking refuge.

Tara outlined Longford Women's Link's manifesto and work in cutting through the jargon and acronyms common to the sector. This led to the SheSchool project (part of See Her Elected in collaboration with 50:50 North West), which is focused on encouraging and supporting women to come forward for elected positions. The #SeeHerElected campaign has formed a public element of this project, which includes training, skill building and building relationships and networks. Over 120 women have participated to date, and a new cohort of 30 women are due to start the programme. In conclusion, Tara stressed that women's voices need to be heard, and women need to be fully involved in public decision making to safeguard women's rights and strengthen policy making that works for women.

Discussion

The initial discussion focused on the Bill of Rights and the proposals in the New Decade, New Approach document. It was noted that this process is significant, and should remain a priority. It was also noted that peace should not be taken for granted, but ongoing work to maintain and defend it is essential. Examples of regions where violence has recently flared up again were mentioned, such as the Nagorno-Karabach region. It was also noted that EU provisions have been central to gender equality in Northern Ireland, and this also needs to be a focus to ensure rights are not rolled back. In addition, parity of rights across the island of Ireland is written into agreements, and this should be highlighted continuously. A campaign for the Civic Forum was also suggested, noting that the Civic Forum was the Women's Coalition's contribution to the Good Friday Agreement seeking a more inclusive and diverse approach for the future.

Article 2 in the Northern Ireland protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement was raised and it was noted that this is important in terms of keeping pace on gender equality and rights in future. The Dedicated Mechanism to oversee this was emphasised as a means for safeguarding rights; however, it was noted that many issues are still subject to policy decisions at UK government level.

Closing remarks

Rachel concluded that many issues are shared by women's organisations across the UK, but welcomed the opportunity to understand specific Northern Ireland issues better. She also noted that the end to data sharing will create a gap in the evidence base in the UK, and also expressed concern that divergence is likely due to the current direction of the UK government.

Tara emphasised that continued dialogue, conversation and collaboration is vital to maintain information sharing and relationships. She reiterated that this is also important to not lose sight of the shared priorities, aims and wishes most people have, regardless of where they live.

Louise said that rights was the least well known area among women involved in the research of priorities undertaken in 2018; particularly in relation to Brexit, and felt that improved information is key to empower women for the future. Women are also not a homogeneous group, but have very different needs and issues, and this must be kept in mind to ensure everyone's rights. International instruments can play a role in keeping this on the policy making agenda and should therefore be prioritised more than ever.

"To create change, women have to be elected and at the table"

Panellists

Dr Rachel Minto, Cardiff University

- Lecturer in Politics, Wales Governance Centre, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University
- Research background in EU politics and governance; joined Wales Governance Centre in 2016 to apply this background to questions surrounding the UK's withdrawal from the EU and UK devolved politics.
- Two important strands of research:
 - Wales' relationship with the EU;
 - Women's rights and gender equality.

Louise Coyle, Director, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

Louise Coyle is the organisation Director for Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN). Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) was established in September 2006 'to promote and support rural women in rural Northern Ireland'. NIRWN is a membership based organisation whose mission is 'to amplify and articulate the voice of rural women at local, regional and strategic level'. Louise has worked with the organisation since its inception and prior to this worked in both the community/voluntary and statutory sectors.

Louise is passionate about; gender equality, women's empowerment and the critical role of women in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. As an advocate for rural women Louise has made representations to local government; Westminster; Dublin; Europe and has engaged in Civil Society representations to the United Nations in Geneva and New York.

Tara Farrell, Deputy Chief Executive, Longford Women's Link

Tara Farrell is the Deputy CEO of Longford Women's Link (LWL). A native of Roscommon, Tara has over 21 years' experience in the Community, Voluntary and Education sectors, working in a variety of areas including Project Management, Social Economy, Gender Equality, Conflict Resolution and engaging in Broadcast and Social Media. She holds an LLM in International Human Rights Law and has also lectured in Political Science in the University of Limerick and Management Development at Dublin City University. Tara is the Chairperson of AONTAS and is also a Director of Irish Rural Link and Roscommon Women's Network. Tara also lectures in Human Rights and Equality at St. Angela's College (National University of Ireland Galway) in Sligo. LWL provides a wide range of services to women in Longford and the surrounding areas – their flagship 'Women's Manifesto' Programme has developed a model of local democratic engagement and the SHE Programme in partnership with 50:50 North West is a rural strategy to address the under-representation of women in rural Ireland. Tara has sat on the Steering Group of two cross border programmes – Towards a New Common Chapter (Centre for Cross Border Studies) and The Next Chapter (Politics Plus/NICVA/IRL). LWL is a member of the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation.