

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, HC 157

Wednesday 7 July 2021

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley; Bob Stewart.

Questions 1013 - 1036

Witnesses

I: Elaine Crory, Good Relations Co-ordinator, Women's Resource and Development Agency; Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency; Eileen Weir, Network Co-ordinator, Shankill Women's Centre.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Elaine Crory, Rachel Powell and Eileen Weir.

Chair: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to this session on Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. It is nice to see everybody here this morning, and an especially warm welcome to our witnesses today. I have three little bits of business to go through first. First of all, are there any declarations of interest from any members of the Committee?

Ian Paisley: I have a declaration of interest. I am involved in a commercial legal case against the protocol in the English High Court.

Chair: We have received apologies from Scott Benton. It would be remiss of me if, on behalf of the Committee, I did not wish Bob Stewart a very happy birthday. Happy birthday, Bob. You have NIAC and then the ISC. Who could ask for any better birthday presents than those two House of Commons Committees? Have a lovely day.

Bob Stewart: Thank you.

Q1013 **Chair:** We are going to have two panels this morning. From a very cursory glance at media, social media, blogs, etc, women in Northern Ireland of all experiences, ages, socioeconomic groups, etc, seem to be finding it harder today to have a platform for their voice to be heard than they have previously. I wonder if you could give us a flavour of your involvement in public debate, public discourse and public policy. I am not asking you to comment on what all women in Northern Ireland are thinking, but can you pull out a theme? What are your friends and relatives saying, people at the school gate, in work or wherever it may happen to be?

Rachel Powell: The very first theme for all women is the absence of women in discussions in relation to Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol, particularly in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol. In recent months, there has been little to no engagement with the women's sector on this issue.

We recently conducted some primary research with women in Northern Ireland as a part of the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland's feminist recovery plan. I want to highlight a few points that have come from women directly in Northern Ireland. When asked about Brexit and whether they felt that Brexit was a threat to women's human rights, just 6.5% of respondents said that they did not think Brexit was a threat, which shows you how concerned women are in relation to Brexit, specifically about the threats to their human rights; 55.1% of respondents were extremely concerned about the impact of Brexit on their human rights, and 38.4% were unsure and felt that Brexit led to a great amount of uncertainty.

The main theme that we got from women when we asked them about their thoughts on Brexit was around socioeconomic rights and how there are major threats to these, but that this is being lost in the discourse



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around the Northern Ireland protocol. Women have repeatedly told us that a lot of their rights and safeguards came from the EU, and they do not have very much faith that either the UK Government or the Northern Ireland Assembly will ensure that any measures in the EU are matched in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to maternity and workplace rights.

That is the strongest theme that we are getting from women. It comes down to rights. It comes down to Article 2 of the protocol and how annex 1 needs to be expanded, but in general there has been little to no engagement. In my own role as women's sector lobbyist, I have had just one meeting with anyone from the UK Government, and that was a roundtable with the Secretary of State, back in January. I was the only woman from the women's sector on the call, and I asked if any women of colour or migrant women could be invited, as they face disproportionate risks, and I was told no, yet there were 10-plus representatives from business there. I have had just one meeting at an EU level. Again, it was just an overview of these issues, but nothing has happened on the back of it.

We have been really struggling to get any engagement on this, to have our voices heard and to share these concerns from women. Our requests to meet with the Northern Ireland Office since have been denied. That is the gist of it, as an introductory comment.

Q1014 Chair: Just pausing there, can I just tease out a couple of things? You talked about a lack of faith in Stormont and Westminster. Is there any differentiation in view, in terms of which one can be either trusted more or trusted least, I suppose, depending which way you look at it?

Rachel Powell: I have some testimonies here from women. They are largely saying that they do not trust the UK Government when it comes to the Human Rights Act and protecting human rights, and that there seems to be a lot of effort to strip away these rights in a post-Brexit context.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, the mistrust comes from the fact that we are so far behind when it comes to human rights legislation, particularly relating to women's rights. We are so far behind in almost every measurable outcome. Equality legislation is devolved and there has been a failure since the Good Friday agreement to embed human rights fully in our local legislation. That is where the fear comes from. Other issues seem to constantly take priority and women's views are constantly dismissed. That is alongside women being very poorly represented and the women's sector not being very actively engaged.

With the UK Government, there is concern about the Tory Government. I will read two quotes: "You cannot trust the Tory Government with human rights, never mind women's rights"; and "The Conservative Government seem bent on a path to eroding all basic working rights, which disproportionately impact women. I am fearful the Government will use



Brexit to undo the little social protections that we already have in terms of balancing work and care, which disproportionately impacts women". That is what we generally have been told by women in our research.

Q1015 **Chair:** Is there any standout on the data analysis between, for want of a better phrase, the traditions that these women's voices are coming from, or indeed in the age profile, or was the survey not that granular?

Rachel Powell: Within the demographics of those we surveyed, we did not ask whether they were from the traditional PUL or CNR communities. We asked their age, and we had an even spread across all age groups. We also then asked about employment status and geographic location. About 60% were from an urban area and 40% from rural, which roughly matches how women are split across Northern Ireland. We then asked more specific questions around financial impact, their childcare and caring responsibilities and other issues relating to that. We found that there was no standout between one community or the other. The results were pretty consistent for all women who responded.

Q1016 **Chair:** Ms Powell, it is interesting that you reference the ethnic population of Northern Ireland, with the black and Chinese populations, etc. I do not know if you know, but the Committee is instigating an inquiry; we have been taking evidence precisely on that issue, and we will be taking oral evidence in the autumn. It may very well be that you would like to feed into that as well, as a useful source of overview. Ms Crory, do you want to give us your thoughts on that question?

Elaine Crory: Yes, absolutely. I find that, at an analysis level, it tends to be quite superficial. People often look at Northern Ireland from outside of it. They see that, until recently, we had a woman First Minister, and we still have a woman Deputy First Minister. There are women leading other parties here, so they think women in Northern Ireland must be doing well; we have a better record in terms of leadership of parties than plenty of other jurisdictions on these two islands, but that does not necessarily translate into the lives of the actual women living here. It takes something exceptional for women to climb to the top of a political party, but that is about individuals. That is not about a collective of women.

For many women, we feel as far away from rooms like the room we are in now—it is obviously not a physical room—as from the top of Mount Everest. It is simply inaccessible to a lot of people. In my outreach work we go to women's centres and women's groups and take their views on issues, and I have noticed there is a fatigue. There is a feeling that, "I have said this all before. I said it two years ago. I said it two years before that. Nobody is listening, so I am wasting my time".

It is hard to counter that, because we do that on a regular basis. We write up reports, we respond to consultations and we send letters. We do everything by the book, and it is so difficult to get invited into a room, or even to be heard once you are in that room, because oftentimes it seems like you finally get invited, you are quite prepared and you do not sleep



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the night before; you arrive, you are not asked any questions and you are not listened to when you speak.

There is a huge gap between the surface perception of elected women in leadership and the reality in terms of an average, ordinary woman actually having her opinion heard in a room like this one.

Q1017 **Chair:** Thank you for that. As I said in my opening remarks, even a cursory glance of media commentary echoes very much what you have been saying. I agree that you can say things, but if you are not heard, people just get bored, do they not, and they go and do something else? It then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People say, "We did not hear from this group of people or that group of people, so they cannot be interested". It just compounds the problem.

Elaine Crory: Yes.

Q1018 **Chair:** Ms Weir, can I ask you for your thoughts on that?

Eileen Weir: I mainly work at grassroots level; I would be hands-on. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be invited to be heard, and I hope to be listened to.

Chair: You will be both, I can assure you.

Eileen Weir: We have to start with that at everything that we do, because we have to work twice as hard to be heard. At grassroots level, if it was not for the information that I am receiving from the women's sector and the women's movement, a lot of people would be more confused than they already are. We are trying to explain the protocol to the best of our knowledge, because not everybody understands what the protocol is meaning to ordinary, working-class communities here across north and west Belfast, which would be my main areas of concern, in the areas that have been worst hit, where there has been violence over the last lot of months.

To get a seat at the table at grassroots level is nearly impossible. I have been working in this field from the Shankill Women's Centre over the last 26 years, and, as a good relations and network co-ordinator, I have never been asked to sit at a table when there has been interface violence or there has been anything happening on the ground. I am not saying it should be me, but in the network that I co-ordinate, there are 21 groups involved in that, right across the greater north Belfast area, and we have never once been asked for our opinion of what is happening in those areas. In many of those cases, a lot of those women are, at the weekends, every weekend, throughout the year, trying to keep interface violence at ease. When it comes to talking to people in those areas, the women who are keeping the peace the whole year round are not invited along to give their opinion. It is an issue.

I do not want rid of men. We all need to be around the table together and have all of our opinions, ideas and suggestions listened to, so that we can



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come out with a win-win situation and not an us-and-them situation. What is unique about the women's movement is we do not have us and them. We have women, and it does not matter where they are from. We get the sense of all the communities, should it be Protestant communities, Catholic communities, Indian communities or Chinese communities. We are involved with all of those women, right across; I might not be personally, but I know who is, and I can lift the phone and ask the question within the women's movement and get answers, which is crucial.

Last week, the Falls Women's Centre, Falls Community Council, Shankill Women's Centre and a couple of other organisations got together to try to explain and take away some of the fears of the protocol. Within that room, we had people saying that they feared their Britishness, and we had other people from the same community background saying, "We do not fear ours". There is a conflict within, never mind a conflict across, in terms of failing to understand this, but one thing is for sure: the protocol is causing hardship with women throughout this community. All the communities, both rural or urban, are paying extra at the till for our messages, food and bills, which have always been more expensive than the mainland over in Great Britain. We do not get any extra benefits to deal with the hard costs and particularly the unsettlement that it is causing within our communities.

Chair: We, as a Committee, raised in a report the potential negative impacts on the cost of living as a result of checks or regulatory requirements, and the fact that those were likely to hit hardest those who would least afford it. Ms Weir, I do not know if it is any consolation to you, but all of us in GB are noticing that our food bills are higher now than they were this time last year, and certainly, talking to some of my local food retailers, they are all saying that their costs are going up as well.

Let me just take you back, if I may, to that main point, which is hugely worrying: you do not get invited to give your opinion, to state your case, etc. You may not be able to answer this question, but in your assessment, is that because people do not think to invite you or representatives of your organisation, or they do but they are afraid of what they will hear and what they will be told, and therefore they take a conscious decision not to? I appreciate it is probably just a hunch, but what would your hunch be on that as a proposition?

Eileen Weir: I will give you my hunch, and I am sure Elaine and Rachel have hunches of their own.

Chair: I can see by the way that they are smiling that there is a chord that the question has struck, but the floor is still yours.

Eileen Weir: It must be fear of us women, because what else would there be if it was not fearing what we would have to say? Maybe it is because we speak a different language and we always look for a solution.



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We do not look for a fight; we like a good debate, and we call it out. There are a lot of people who have not been called out over the years. I can only talk for gatherings within communities that I work across. It is the same people, and it has been the same people for the last 23 years. We are still talking about getting round the table after 23 years. Surely we can do no worse, if not add a bit of quality to those talks and negotiations that are happening in those areas.

There are organisations like the LCC getting a voice and platform, and a lot of women are not getting an opportunity. I can assure you the LCC do not speak for everybody within the Protestant community. I work with groups, with women; I would say there would be thousands connected to the networks that I work in, and I have not heard one person say to me that the LCC spoke on their behalf.

Elaine Crory: The question absolutely struck a chord. We sometimes talk among ourselves about why it was so obvious that there was extreme discomfort when, for example, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition appeared on the scene back in the 1990s. I was a teenager at the time, watching it on television. It reminded me of the kind of discomfort, almost performative discomfort, that you sometimes see from teenage boys when they are no longer the centre of attention. I am not having a go at anybody personally, but I think the discomfort comes from the feeling that a power base is being eroded. I might have my constitutional view and Eileen and Rachel will have theirs, but together we are primarily interested in the everyday things that affect the women that we try to work on behalf of, and those things comes first; our constitutional view comes second.

They even arranged their leadership at the time in such a way that they had two leaders at any one time, each one from a different traditional community. That made a mockery almost of the politics in Northern Ireland. It tends to be very, "You are either on this side or you are on that side", and there is a distrust of anybody who is attempting to find any middle ground; I do not mean "middle ground" in constitutional terms; I mean a focus primarily on day-to-day issues, the bread-and-butter issues, which is what we are trying to do very hard in our work and in our everyday lives.

It is uncomfortable when people try to shift the conversation away from where it has been very comfortable for either side of the constitutional debate. They know exactly where they stand; they feel strongly about exactly where they stand. That is excellent, but it is almost a tendency to run into the corner and always fall back on the one argument and not to deal with the day-to-day issues that come up, because there is one thing that trumps everything.

It seems to me that there is a discomfort. "Fear" is maybe going a little far, but certainly there is a massive discomfort with anybody who might enter the room and pull the focus to a different issue.



Q1019 **Chair:** Just based on this early part of the proceedings, I am going to guess I am possibly not alone on the Committee in thinking that there is a separate piece of work that needs to be done here to try to pull together quite a lot of this. You will appreciate we are here to talk about the Brexit issue. Ms Powell, let me just ask you for your thoughts.

Rachel Powell: In answering your question, I would certainly say that it is very much a conscious decision to exclude the women's sector from these discussions, because the Northern Ireland women's sector is extremely close-knit, well connected, and works together in partnership and collaboration, and has done since before any ceasefire or peace agreement in Northern Ireland. They have continued to do so regardless of their own individual views on constitutional issues.

Women across Northern Ireland quite often challenge the systemic and structural barriers that they are facing regardless of what background they are from. If anything, we very much try to highlight how different women are disproportionately impacted, because they are from an urban or rural area, they are working class, they are from an ethnic minority, they are disabled or whatever it may be. We are constantly trying to challenge these systemic and structural barriers. That can seem like it is an inconvenient narrative that does not fit with the discussions that are happening, and, like Elaine and Eileen both said, can take away from what is already happening.

To us, those are the issues that are the solution. If you are able to address those systemic issues around women's participation, women's protection and other pillars of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, we will have a much better, sustainable peace process in Northern Ireland, because women are doing this community work and are not being recognised for it. Women are doing a lot of the work on behalf of the Government that should be done, and they are not getting recognition for it.

In the last year alone, we have worked endlessly in providing the evidence to our Government on how women are being disproportionately impacted by different issues and providing bit-by-bit roadmaps on how to solve these issues, with exact policy recommendations on what they need to do. We are not even getting a response to these roadmaps that we are developing.

We are collecting our own data with women where our Government and statutory bodies are failing to do, and recording that information through our own underfunded, overworked and under-resourced sector, to try to say, "This is how bad the issue is", but it is still being completely neglected. Some of the clearest examples of that are through the Covid recovery process, where women have not been mentioned. In the majority of the roadmaps throughout 2020, there has been no mention of childcare and no mention of the drastic rise in violence against women and murder of women throughout lockdown, or about how the constant de-prioritisation of women's issues means that we are the only part of the



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UK or Ireland without an executive childcare strategy and a violence against women and girls' strategy, despite the fact that our post-conflict status leads to very unique issues of gender-based violence.

For too long, they have not fit into the narrative that has been in the majority in Northern Ireland, and women's issues have been dismissed despite the fact that all women are impacted by these. I would very much say that it is intentional. The women's sector has a lot to say. We are incredibly vocal, organised and hard-working, but some very vocal minorities seem to have their voices heard more than ours, despite the fact we represent 51% of the population.

Q1020 Chair: Rachel, can I just clarify? You referred to "our Government". I am taking that you mean Stormont rather than Westminster.

Rachel Powell: In a multilateral governance area, I will say I mean both, because, for the Northern Ireland Executive, it is easy to focus on those other issues; for the UK Government, it is easy to just dismiss issues as devolved and not deal with them.

Q1021 Mr Campbell: It is welcome to see the women before us today. It is many years since I first took an initiative to try to address the barriers to greater female participation in politics. It is work where there is definitely a requirement to step up a gear. Ms Powell, you spoke about your survey among women and their attitudes to the protocol, Brexit, etc. Is that something that is ongoing, or was that done at the start of the year? When did that occur?

Rachel Powell: That has just recently finished. Last year, in the Women's Policy Group, about 30 individuals from different organisations across the entire voluntary and community sector came together to develop a Covid feminist recovery plan. That was last July. We made the decision to relaunch it this July; the relaunch is happening on Wednesday 28 July. I have sent an invite; I think it has gone out to your committee packs. As a part of that, we decided to undertake some primary research with grassroots women to gain their views on these issues, and also decided to do a number of testimonies and interviews. That finished on 13 June. We have just analysed the survey data. It is going to be formally launched on 28 July.

Q1022 Mr Campbell: I am glad to hear that it is quite recent. When we look at Covid recovery, the vaccination rollout began in December or January, and the EU took a conscious decision not to roll out a very significant vaccination programme, which thankfully the UK did. If you look at the figures, I am wondering whether any research was done. If there was, did the women give any views? For example, in the last four months, when the vaccination programme has been ramped up, there have been about 4,000 deaths in the UK, but there have been about 80,000 deaths just in France, Italy and Germany, and much of that must go down to the failure of the EU to roll out the vaccination programme. Was any consideration given to that? Was there any concern about that, or any



views regarding it?

Rachel Powell: Yes. Consideration was not specific to the vaccination but other issues, such as austerity and the impact it is having on health were considered. I have a few stats from this to show you. About 25% had decreased hours and 14% had reduced pay. Around 50% had less savings and 35% were struggling to pay bills, while another 22% were in increased debt. Almost 20% had to apply for universal credit, and over 12% had to apply to food banks, with the majority of these being single parents. Within the single-parent population in Northern Ireland, 91% are women.

Health-wise, the biggest and most shocking impact was that 38.1% have been impacted by increased waiting lists; 50% from an ethnic minority community experienced increased issues in accessing services, and 82% reported that their mental health struggled significantly. The most common theme coming out of this research from women was that the austerity regime from the UK Government, particularly the Conservative party, is what led to these pre-existing inequalities, which have drastically worsened women's health and economic wellbeing in Northern Ireland, particularly the fact that 86% of tax revenue savings over the last decade came from women's income.

Rather than specifically referencing the vaccination programme, when we asked women about the health impacts, the worst impact was poverty and destitution as a result of welfare reform.

Q1023 **Mr Campbell:** Those are obviously very serious issues. I just wondered if the thousands of people who are alive in the UK, who might otherwise have been dead had we followed the EU route on vaccination, featured at all.

Rachel Powell: No, it did not feature. The vast health outcomes for people due to austerity was the priority, and particularly the vast number of disabled women who have died as a result of Covid, and the fact that the disabled population account for two thirds of all Covid deaths, as well as the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have been dying as a result of austerity in the lead-up to Covid. The widespread attacks on our health and social care systems that led to preventable deaths was a common theme coming through the research, not specific to the vaccinations.

We can all agree that Northern Ireland has done extremely well in the vaccination rollout, and I am absolutely delighted about that. I am from a border area, in Armagh, and I look at my family in the south who are still struggling to access vaccinations. That is an issue, but for women in Northern Ireland, in terms of their health impacts, the concern was more around policies attacking low-income and disabled families.

Q1024 **Chair:** The protocol has been described as unsustainable in its current form. From your experience in talking to your colleagues, how manifest is



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this concern with the protocol among the communities in Northern Ireland? It always seems to be very polarised. One group absolutely hates it; another group is prepared to support it because it is the least worst option, etc. There is never any grey in the middle. I wonder if you could give us your thinking.

Elaine Crory: I know that Eileen and Rachel will have things to say about this too, but I wanted to tell you about some of the work that I have done in the five or six months running up to the summer. It is community relations work with women, and what I normally do at the start of a series of weeks of work is ask them what they think is the biggest issue in their community. By their community, I could mean something very local, I could mean the city or town they live in or the whole of Northern Ireland, depending on how they see it. I just write down on a sheet of paper everything they have said, and then we try to draw connections. You get different answers in different communities and from different individuals. Some people will think very locally; some people will think much more broadly. You can get everything from, "Dog fouling on my street" up to climate change, and everything in between.

The one thing that never came up by name was the protocol. People were worried about Brexit as an overall—"We do not know what is going to happen". It was not so much the concept of Brexit or of the protocol. It was the uncertainty and the worry that it might lead to more unrest. Of course, we have seen unrest here, but, from what I could glean, they meant something much more sustained and long-term.

Without being in any way rude to anybody in this room, there is a sense sometimes that our politicians are making mistakes that will have repercussions for them, not by name or party, but just a sense that, "This might not be in hands that are thinking primarily of the effects it will have on me, my community and my family. It is in the hands of people driven by a particular perspective that almost does not care about the effects it might have on me".

This was about Brexit as a whole. I will agree with something that Eileen said. There is a perception out there, which has been around since just after the Brexit vote first happened. From my experience in my work, broadly speaking, there is a worry in the PUL community that, in some way, this might undermine their identity as a British person—not Brexit as a concept but the outworkings of it. That is a real anxiety that I have sensed in people, to the point where they will bring it up when the conversation is about something entirely unrelated.

There is a sensitivity and a worry, and, like I said, perhaps a feeling that these concerns are maybe not being taken seriously by everybody who should be taking them seriously. People do not necessarily have any policy-related concerns. It is more that Brexit came in at a time when Unionism was perhaps already feeling a little fragile. "Fragile" might not be the right word, but it has exacerbated things. It has opened wounds. It has made it impossible to put off dealing with certain issues. They are



just not sure how that is going to shake out, and they are anxious about it.

Eileen Weir: I am probably very fortunate because I work with a group of women who come from across north and west Belfast, and, as we always do, we have that difficult conversation in the room. Women are very good at having the difficult conversation. There is a lot of confusion, I would say, more than anything else. Women from different community backgrounds are approaching me, saying, "What is the protocol? Is it about the Good Friday agreement? Is it about the protocol? What is it about?" because everything we are hearing is very negative, and it is tied in to the Good Friday agreement, which is confusing a lot of people.

There are parts of it that are very concerning. The protocol is not good; it is not right; it needs fixing. There are solutions. They get that on the ground, but I would like to hear coming out in the media about trying to encourage industry to come into Northern Ireland, to give our young people a future. We need hope within these communities, because a lot of these young people do not have that hope; they do not have the aspiration of even getting a job. If we are able to attract industry here, we can get our young people into jobs and fix the outstanding issues with the single market trade. There are ways of fixing it.

Some crazy things happen here through the protocol. I would explain what I know of it, and I probably know more than most of the women I am working with. If I want to buy a part for my car, which is going to go into my car, why should that be cleared? It is not going to go anywhere else. It is going to go into my car. I am not going to transport it into Europe. There is no fear of industry wanting parts. Even tractors to be on a field—that is not going to go anywhere else, only Northern Ireland. Why should there be restrictions? Why should they be held up? I know women who regularly post parcels to England; they used to pay £3.95 to post a parcel, and they are now paying £9.95 to post the same parcel over to GB.

Some of the things within the protocol are absolutely crazy, and they affect the ordinary working class. We are now having a big problem within our communities. There has been a bit of research, although I do not have the figures of it, that suggests that paramilitarism is now doing money lending, because their business has not been as proactive since the protocol came into effect. Money lending within communities is a nightmare, because people are already in debt and in poverty. When they cannot pay that money back, what is the outcome? This is all coming from the protocol. This is all coming from the conversation, and the community propaganda is rife.

The good thing about it all is that the women from across the communities have not divided, no matter whether it is a PUL concern or not. They are all together and they are supporting each other in it. The power of the community sector in Northern Ireland meant that we



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responded to the first lockdown within 24 hours. We had things set in place. We were able to get food banks established, because we already had them, because poverty was at its lowest prior to the lockdown. We got food banks. We knew the people who were self-employed and who were not getting furlough, and we made sure that they were looked after. The community responded right across. We did not work in our own silos; we worked across all communities, and we are still doing a lot there.

The protocol needs fixing. It is not good in parts, but we are only hearing the negative; we are not hearing the positive. Our communities need to have some positive language coming out. We cannot keep hearing doom and gloom. We need to have that positive message that comes along with it, while continuing to work on the bits that are not working. I am not saying we should forget about it. I am saying fix it, but just do not dwell on the hardship of it. Let us dwell on some of the good parts of it, because a lot businesses are thriving here, within Northern Ireland. People cannot get their supplies in from Great Britain, so our local markets are actually providing supermarkets now that they never did here. There is a lot of good stuff happening, but we are only hearing of the negatives.

Q1025 Chair: Eileen, why do you think that is? Why is there such a focus on the hardship, to use your phrase? I jotted down your quote, "We need hope".

Eileen Weir: Yes, absolutely.

Q1026 Chair: Why is the glass always half empty rather than half full?

Eileen Weir: It is always half full in my eyes, but we need leadership. We need our political leadership from right across all political parties. I am not pointing one out or the other, because this blame game is no good either. We are going to keep blaming people for what they did or did not do. We are here. This is where we are at, and this is where we need to start working from, not going back 100 years. We need to be moving forward for the next 100 years.

We have big problems here within communities at grassroots level. One of the areas that I work in is greater north Belfast, which is most of the interfaces throughout the whole province. Of the interface workers and the good relations workers working in that area, 73% of them will not be there within the next five years. We need to future-proof good relations for the whole of Northern Ireland. I have only taken a small area of Belfast, and if 73% of those workers are no longer going to be there within the next five years, we have big problems. You think we have problems now; if we do not future-proof good relations in Northern Ireland, we will have even bigger problems in the future.

There is nobody coming in behind me. Who is going to want to come into a job where you are guaranteed a year's funding? How can we encourage younger people to come on board and take up the reins of good relations work across all communities? I had to defer my pension for two years in



the hope that I can find somebody in that two years who can fit in and get the good relations work done. We are in big trouble here if people do not start taking notice of what the community sector is saying right across the whole province.

Q1027 Chair: You strike me as somebody who can give me a succinct and robust response to this question. Given the issues that the three of you have been talking across this morning, what would your message be to those—there are some; it is a minority—who say, “Let us collapse Stormont. Let us shred the Good Friday agreement. Let us just move away from all of that and do things differently?”

Given that you have all been talking about the need for service uplift and focus on policy best delivered through devolution, and given that you are talking about stability and certainty—in my assessment, a very important plank in that is the maintenance of the Good Friday agreement—what do you say to those who take a different view?

Eileen Weir: I will let Rachel come in there; she has her hand up.

Chair: Eileen, it was a question to you, because you were talking about the leadership side of things.

Eileen Weir: Prior to the Good Friday agreement being signed, in terms of community organisations, you just look at the history of the 14 women’s centres that were across the province at that time. For about 10 to 12 years prior to the Good Friday agreement, we were working together. We did not need a Good Friday agreement. We would sit down around the table and have the conversations. We were representing women who were actually at the blunt end of the conflict in Northern Ireland, right across the communities.

Women from across all the communities were at the blunt end and the coalface of the conflict here. For 12 to 15 years prior to the Good Friday agreement, the women’s sector got together, and we were helping to support women in those communities, because a lot of the men were in prison. Women were keeping the homes going, keeping the kids clothed with very little money, and taking up stuff to H-Blocks or Long Kesh or wherever. There was a need for support for women at that time. Even then, we were talking about the bread-and-butter issues that were being forgotten about because we had a conflict and we had men in prison.

When the Good Friday agreement happened, we did not need anybody to shake hands. We were already in a good relationship with women from right across. The women were doing that hard work under the radar because it was not safe to do it openly. We were doing it under the radar. I was one of those people doing it under the radar. Rachel and Elaine are of the younger generation, and both of their parents were in my position. We did that work underneath the radar.

I believe that we would not have had the Good Friday agreement if not for the work done on the ground, working across with women’s



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organisations and others at that time. From the Good Friday agreement, we have still been doing that. The difference now is we do not still have to do it under the radar to the degree that we used to have to do it under the radar, but there is still work we need to do under the radar because people still have fears in their own communities, about getting involved in certain projects.

We still do an awful lot of stuff underneath the radar, but we do a hell of a lot more. Like Rachel and Elaine, we have lobbyists now. We have a lot of people out there representing organisations. One of the reasons why networks were set up is that there was a fear of speaking out, but if a network was speaking out, there was no individual being targeted for what they were saying they were feeling. I believe, at that time, and even still—I am an optimist—that the Good Friday agreement was a sign of hope. Not everybody agreed with that Good Friday agreement. I did not agree with everything that was in the Good Friday agreement, but I agreed with more than I did not agree with. That is why I voted in favour. It was a sign of hope, because communities and women could not continue doing what they were doing, and they needed a way out. The Good Friday agreement was a way out for communities to have a bit of hope.

There are a lot of things within that Good Friday agreement that have not been settled. We still do not have a bill of rights in Northern Ireland. We still have not dealt with the past and the legacy issues. We did have a civic forum, which was suspended; that was one of the things that I liked about the Good Friday agreement, but we no longer have it. There is a lot of stuff in the Good Friday agreement, and we need to get back to basics with that.

I know that we have the Stormont House agreement and the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I could probably quote the Good Friday agreement from cover to page, but I could not do it with the other ones because they near enough made it impossible for people at grassroots level to understand these agreements that were not voted for. We all voted for the Good Friday agreement. That is one thing for sure: that was an agreement that people voted for. We did not vote for any other agreements prior to that. I know there was space left within the Good Friday agreement to add to it and take away from it, because of the nature of it at that time, but it is looking more and more as though the Good Friday agreement is not that important, but it is. It is important for a lot of people in the community, and we need to hold on to the principle of that Good Friday agreement.

Chair: Thank you, Ms Weir. I am conscious of time. This conversation could run all day and we could stop for tea and cake halfway through, but I know my colleagues have an awful lot of questions. Rachel and Elaine, I know you both have your hands up. You can have a 30-second word on this, and then I am going to go to Bob Stewart. It is my fault. I have been enjoying the conversation too much, so I am chastising myself.



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Rachel Powell: I would just like to reiterate some of the points that Eileen made. An overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland voted for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It needs to be protected regardless of whether individual political parties agree with it. There is a commitment as well to the equal participation of women in political and public life; that has not been realised.

There is also a commitment to a bill of rights. I just want to highlight that in our research, only 1.5% of women did not support a bill of rights. That is overwhelming. That is a commitment to us. In terms of a lot of these issues, particularly around Article 2 of the Northern Ireland protocol and the limitations of the rights protected in annex 6, a bill of rights for Northern Ireland could solve a lot of these issues to do with the protocol. I guarantee a lot of people are not particularly concerned about the price of sausages. People are concerned about their rights and their identity, and a bill of rights is what is going to protect that. It is time that these issues were resolved.

We also need the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security. We have done a lot of research on the nexus between protecting participation and—I can come back to it later.

Chair: We all forget it is a process at our peril. Thank you.

Elaine Croy: Regarding the question of the collapse of Stormont and the end of devolution, I live in fear of this, genuinely and truly, because I am thinking not just about the future for the women who are about right now, but about our children and our grandchildren. We owe it to them to do everything that we can within Stormont, which is flawed in multiple ways and frustrating in many ways, but it is a way we will get, for example, laws on stalking, which we do not have at the moment. It is in the process of coming through. If Stormont collapses, I simply will not be able to forgive that.

We should also understand about collapsing Stormont on the basis of the protocol and something that could be worked out in meetings. When it is eventually worked out, it will be in meetings like this; it will not be in front of the public. Ultimately, it is human lives that are being affected if we allow Stormont to collapse for the sake of a staunch unionist or nationalist, or whatever it may be. These are things that are affecting human beings of all backgrounds right now, today. The sooner we can act, the better. In fact, it is shameful that it has taken so long already.

Q1028 **Bob Stewart:** The protocol is obviously not working. I can see that very well indeed. Eileen, you have already explicitly put out some of the problems you have. I am going to try to look it from the loyalist point of view. Do you think the loyalist would like to see the whole thing scrapped—you said some parts of it were quite good—or for it to be changed a little bit?



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As we are behind time, the second part of my question is about what engagement you have had, if you have ever had any, with Government and the European Union on your concerns, because they are pretty big concerns, and I too have big concerns about the protocol. Eileen, can you answer that question?

Eileen Weir: I will answer part of it, and Rachel can come in and answer the other part of it. I cannot speak on behalf of loyalists, because loyalists within loyalism have so many different points of view. I have spoken to a few loyalists, but I cannot speak on behalf of them.

A number of women I have spoken to who are from loyalist community backgrounds are openly saying to me they do not understand it. They are reading what is on social media and listening to community propaganda. When I explain to them about the single market, the trade and how an industry could come here and supply the whole of Europe and all over the place, they are going, "I did not know that was in it".

How can people speak and be fair if a big portion of that loyalist community do not even understand what is in the protocol? We need to have an easy-read protocol booklet put out to people in the communities so that they do not listen to community propaganda, they read what it is about and then make an informed choice on what the protocol is and is not. I will hand over to Rachel.

Rachel Powell: I just want to clarify something. It is coming across as if we are saying that the Northern Ireland protocol is not working and should be scrapped, and that is not the case. I really want to emphasise that women in Northern Ireland support the protocol and we are very firmly in support of it because of Article 2 and no diminution of human rights. As happens in the media, when there are small criticisms of the protocol by minority communities, they tend to dominate. It is not the case here, and I just need to emphasise that for two reasons.

First of all, we have lost access to the European charter of fundamental rights and the Court of Justice. Those two mechanisms provided much greater protections for women's human rights than just the convention on its own. We already know that the Human Rights Act is under threat within the UK from the Conservative party, which has actively said it wishes to repeal it.

We firmly believe that a lot of the EU directives that are ongoing now and continue to go on need to be better strengthened in the protocol. We do not want to see it removed. We want to see annex 1 of Article 2 strengthened. I am talking about the work-life balance directive, the gender recast directive and directives around caring responsibilities and pay transparency—all of these issues where women are disproportionately impacted in Northern Ireland. I just feel this may be getting lost. We feel that this is of crucial importance.



The aspects of this about human rights and socioeconomic rights, in particular, are where the protocol needs to be improved and strengthened. There needs to be clarity for the dedicated mechanisms through to the two commissions in Northern Ireland on what no diminution of rights means. Like Eileen said, there needs to be an easy-read version for people working in our sector, so that we can clearly identify when no diminution is not happening, because there has already been an alleged breach, as identified by the European Commission, particularly in relation to rural women's representation. I just wanted to clarify that before we go any further.

Q1029 **Bob Stewart:** ECHR has nothing to do with the EU, though, has it?

Rachel Powell: No, but what I am arguing is that—

Q1030 **Bob Stewart:** It is not an EU thing. It is separate.

Rachel Powell: Yes. What I was saying was that the ECHR does not have the same level of protection that we would have been afforded through the charter of fundamental rights and the Court of Justice, which both have a strong history of rectifying issues with women's rights, particularly through the charter, where there is a standalone no-discrimination article, which is not the case in ECHR. My argument is that there is still a loss of rights through Brexit, and that is what I wanted to highlight.

Elaine Crory: In support of what Rachel and Eileen have said, I want to emphasise that, in the research that we did, where we asked for people's perspectives, and in the community work that we are doing, people are not saying to us that they oppose the protocol. What they are saying, at worst, is that they do not understand the protocol. That is not the same thing at all. Part of the reason they do not understand—I want to be clear about this—is, yes, an easy read would be useful, but we are not implying in any way that these people are lacking in intelligence, which is often the way it is framed. That is not the case.

The protocol is being used as a cudgel and it is being propagandised. People are claiming that it is all kinds of things that, in fact, it is not. What they are lacking is any kind of really clear, point-by-point explanation, in laywoman's terms, of what it means and what could happen as a result of it. That might still result in people opposing it, which is 100% fine, but at least they would understand what they were opposing. That is what is missing. When you hold a microphone out and point it directly at the people who oppose it for all sorts of reasons, which is their right, but you hold it only in that direction, you get the impression that everyone opposes it, when in fact they do not.

Q1031 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you to the witnesses. I am aware that we have lots of questions and colleagues want to get in, so I will try to be brief. I have been really struck by some of the feedback you are giving, and particularly the last few contributions, which would appear to me to be



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painting the picture. Elaine, you referred to writing down issues that are being organically raised with you, and the protocol not always jumping out at those. Some of the issues around economic concerns and the fragility of identity predate the protocol.

Eileen Weir, I am sorry for the formality of the Committee, but I wanted to ask you about some of the women you are working with. It has been said that the protocol may have become a focal point for some of those concerns and issues about constitutional change, around this perception of communities losing out to other communities. Is that something that rings to true to you: that maybe the protocol has become the receptacle for a lot of that concern?

Eileen Weir: As I said, we had that conversation two weeks ago and we brought women from Shankill, Falls and north Belfast. It was about the protocol. We had Avila Kilmurray in to go through some of the issues within it and to try to explain the best that she could. Any questions that she could not answer, she said she would go away and get the answers. Not once did the constitutional question come up in that whole gathering. We could have filled the hall, but because of Covid restrictions and social distancing, we had only the number of people in the room that was allowed. We hired a local church hall, because they could put more people into the room. Not once did the constitutional question come up.

Yes, I have conversations, and we have difficult conversations about the constitution. There is a myth that every nationalist wants a united Ireland and wants a border poll. That is not true; that is a myth. You hear it coming from political parties that they want to have a border poll. There is nobody who I know or who I have spoken to throughout my networks who is saying that we need a border poll.

What they are saying very clearly is that, if we cannot unite the people, we are not going to be able to unite the country. The first step that we need to take is to unite the people. Uniting the people does not necessarily mean uniting people from one community with another. We need to unite communities within communities, because we have dysfunction and a diverse view. We have a lot of things happening within communities, depending on what section you come from. There is a small minority of communities that will oppose anything that comes their way.

That should not affect what Elaine and Rachel have already said, which is that the majority of people are concerned about social and economic issues and, in particular, the rate at which mental health is affecting our communities at the minute. The constitutional question has not come in to any of the conversations or debates that I have had with groupings of people. We talk about it individually with people, but it has not come across and there has been plenty of opportunity for it to come in. It may have come in in the sense of, "What do you think about the border poll?" and everybody goes, "We do not need a border poll. There is no way. The time is not right. It is a way down the line". That is why I am concerned about the good relations work in the future.



One good thing is that, in the Troubles, during the conflict, when there was a bit of unrest within Protestant and Catholic communities, as there had been at Lanark Way and Springfield Road over Easter, communities divided. Not this time—communities came together and supported each other, especially within the women’s movement. They did not go back into their silos.

Q1032 Claire Hanna: Elaine Crory, you phrased something really well there: that when the microphone is put repeatedly in front of people who are violently opposed to the protocol, which, as you say, they are entitled to be, the impression is given that everybody is angry and violently opposed to the protocol. This inquiry is about the protocol, but there has been extensive discussion about the views of loyalism on the protocol. That is important, but is it fair to say that there is a wider community of people as well who are not violently opposed to this issue and who would wish to see politicians and the Governments getting on with addressing what frictions there are, making this work and allowing some semblance of normality and good community relations to return?

Elaine Crory: Yes, absolutely; I completely agree with that. At the base of a lot of that is that nobody wants to go back to the way things used to be. There is a genuine fear in people who lived through a whole lot more than I did. They simply cannot countenance that. What they want to do is make what we have work as well as possible. Nobody particularly likes it. People might like it to be different, but we do not live on fantasy island; we live here, and we have to work with what we have. A lot of people are saying, “I am not going to like it if we end up with the protocol in the long term, but let us make it the most workable and least intrusive protocol possible. Surely there are ways that that could be done”.

They hear on the news or in newspapers that some discussion has taken place between the British Government and the EU, and they genuinely do not understand the way it is being reported: “What does that mean for me?” It is not just things like the price of sausages, but, “What does that mean for my community, for my identity or for anything else?” Obfuscation goes on sometimes. Again, the microphone is always pointed at the people who are saying, “This is never going to work”, rather than those people who are saying, “I do not like it either, but here are two or three different ways we could develop it from here on out, and these are the effects that those ways would have”.

The heat in the room is intense and there is very little light. Part of the fear is motivated by the fact that they genuinely do not know what it is going to mean in two, five or 10 years’ time, if we continue with the protocol. They have a gut instinct about what it will mean if we do not have the protocol at all and what could result. That, for many people, is a much bigger fear than living with slightly more expensive sausages.

Q1033 Claire Hanna: Would you agree with the assertion that the fact that people are being told, morning, noon and night, that they are losing and that this is bad is driving some of the fear, rather than people’s own



experience of Brexit or the protocol, or the issues that it throws up?

Elaine Crory: Yes, I agree with that completely. It is tapping in, very deliberately and quite cynically, to the fears that people might have around the erosion of their identity, and that their Britishness might be taken away from them by forces unseen. That is an understandable fear. When people tap into that in order to make them fear one particular political mechanism that maybe does not have anything to do with that, it can direct anger towards the protocol. It is quite a cynical way of using those people's deepest fears, when what should be done to restore calm and to see a way forward is to try to reassure them that their identity will not be taken away from them under any circumstances, and to say, "Here is what could be done with the protocol to make you feel safer in your identity and to make it run more smoothly".

Rachel Powell: Just to briefly answer your question, I want to emphasise that some of the main issues around Brexit and the main concerns are around the lack of protection and what would happen if there was no such measure as a Northern Ireland protocol in place. I want to emphasise again what has been raised before: that one small vocal minority does not represent the views of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I will just give you my experience of being from a rural border area, where we regularly cross the border. Cross-harmonisation is an issue that needs to be in place. This is not just for frontier workers who cross the border on a daily basis—people who get their shopping in the south and work in the north, people who access childcare across the border or whatever it may be. There are very serious repercussions if we do not ensure that there is a seamless way of crossing the border on this island.

I am thinking, for example, of things like the European protection order, of child maintenance payments and of being able to flee domestic abuse and not being under a non-molestation order if you simply move half a mile away from the town that I grew up in, for example. These are very real threats to people, and those who live in rural border communities, like where I come from, are not represented in this very vocal, anti-Northern Ireland protocol rhetoric that is happening now.

Brexit impacts everyone in a different way and everyone has a right to express that. Our issue up to now has been that not everyone has been given an equal opportunity to do so. I know that the next panel will consist of three fantastic rural women, so that is all I will say on the rural side, but I just had to put that in there.

Q1034 **Mr Campbell:** I want to put a question to Eileen Weir. There are a number of women, some of whom we have heard today, who do not want to do away with the protocol. Equally, I have heard other women speaking at protest rallies, online and in the mainstream media about it being much more than sausages and it being a fundamental breach of the integrity of the United Kingdom. Set that aside, because that is a dispute



and a difference of opinion that people are entitled to have.

I am thinking more now about the framework within which communities, and particularly women in communities, operate. Politicians and community groups will have their say, but you very often get people from the community who are commentators, authors or journalists who frame a certain type of debate and narrative about the protocol or divisions in Northern Ireland. They can sometimes engage in caricatures of communities.

Eileen Weir, especially with your experience in the Shankill, do you find that that feeds itself into problems? I have recently seen, for example, journalists turn up at bonfire sites. Abuse is shouted at them: "We will never get a fair hearing", and all of this. Is that, in some way, directed back to how they are perceived in the wider community by commentators and some journalists?

Eileen Weir: I would say yes on a lot of the issues. I have been interviewed umpteen times and I do it because it is part of my role within community empowerment, good community relations, networking and getting information out there. If I do not get an opportunity to sit around a table, I am going to take my opportunity if somebody wants to interview me on radio or TV or within a book. Unfortunately, that is a route that I have to take to be heard, because I am not being heard anywhere else. I agree with part of what you are saying, but living and growing up in the Shankill, I am very passionate about the Shankill Road. I am proud to be from the Shankill Road. People need to really understand that it is not just the protocol that has caused this fear.

I believe in listening to people who I speak to. The first nail in their Britishness was taking the flag down off the City Hall. That started it. The timing was wrong. The community was not aware that that had already been agreed months, if not years, earlier. That started it. It is the way our political system works here in Northern Ireland; whether it is done intentionally or because it is the next thing on the agenda, I do not know, but they need to look at it. They took the flag down and the next big debate that we had within our political arena was on the Irish language. That was another threat to people who feel that their Britishness is being taken away from them. It is unfounded, but that is not what is happening within community propaganda.

We need to be smart. We need to have a smart way of not antagonising minority communities and not giving another community the feeling that they are the winners and the other ones are the losers. We need to come away from that type of politics here. Until we do, we are going to have this media. I was interviewed yesterday by the BBC about our bonfires. I have not been to a bonfire. I cannot remember the last time I was at a bonfire, because the way those bonfires are organised in this day and age does not represent my culture.



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I was interviewed yesterday by people who are going to do interviews around the bonfires. I reminisced about how bonfires used to be and how they were celebrated. They were not celebrated just by one community, and the marching on 12 July was not celebrated just by one sector of the community. Many of my Catholic friends loved to go to see the bands. Because of what has been happening within our politics, and before the Good Friday agreement, we are told, "You belong there and you belong there". Please, we need to get away from that. Until we do, we are going to have these media people coming in and trying to get the negative of what is happening in these communities, not recognising the hard work that community workers are doing on the ground.

It is not just us women, because we have a lot of men out there doing fantastic work too across these communities. We work hand in hand, and many men come to us and say, "Look, I need a wee bit of help with this", and we will help, and vice versa, but there are not very many of those men out there who look at the feminist issue as seriously as other issues.

All we want to do is to have a safe place to live. Shankill Women's Centre has been very fortunate, I have to say. To show you how good relations work and how we can bring communities together, we have secured a new build on Lanark Way for a shared women's centre. That is how progressive we are. We will come under a lot of stick. We will come under a lot of stick internally. I have to say Diane Dodds was very much a part of that at that time. We have had more internal criticism about that and it is not unknown to have had threats as well. We are doing it and we are having those difficult conversations. We are taking the risks that I would like some of our politicians to take with us.

Chair: Ms Weir, that was incredibly powerful, thank you. Elaine Crory wants to come in very briefly. I am then going to turn to Fay Jones and draw this session to a close. I know that we could go on for hours, and we would love to, but time, as you know, presses.

Elaine Crory: I wanted to mention very briefly some of the attitudes, which Mr Campbell referred to in his last question and that Eileen also referred to, towards working-class loyalists. They also exist towards working-class nationalists. It is a classism issue. It manifests slightly differently.

I made an innocuous comment one day about getting up and going to work super-early one morning, and a stranger replied and said to me, "You must be the only person getting up early for work in west Belfast". That is one example, and it was a stranger. We get it all the time: "You are actually going to work, are you? You must be the only working person on your street". It happens in a slightly different format towards working-class loyalists. The problem is classism.

The bigger problem is that it does not come just from social media or from the media; it also comes sometimes from our own politicians sniping towards the other community. To be honest, they let their own



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community down as well as the other community when they engage in it, implying that some people are simply looser about social distancing guidelines, for example, and that that is why the rates of Covid are higher in nationalist communities than unionist communities.

It happens in all sorts of ways. It is manifest in a multitude of examples. The point is that it all erodes our faith in the political process—not the process on paper but those entrusted with carrying it out. It makes us feel as though we are simply tools to be used when they need a few people to turn up at a rally or to vote a certain way, and to be left alone or sneered at the rest of the time.

Q1035 Fay Jones: We have touched on this as part of questions that Claire Hanna asked a few moments ago, but I wanted to talk about the sympathy that is expressed for the violent opposition towards the protocol. Could you give me your thoughts on that?

In the interests of time, I will ask my follow-up as well, to see if you could perhaps address the two points together. Are you concerned about further unrest this summer?

Q1036 Mary Kelly Foy: Thanks to the panel. This has been so interesting and an eye-opener for me as somebody who does not live in Northern Ireland. Following on from that, we know the role that women have played in helping to secure peace in the past. As political and community leaders, what can you do or what would you like to do to create those peaceful routes for expressing and addressing the concerns about the protocol?

Rachel Powell: In response to the first question from Ms Jones, I would say that the unrest is just outright manipulation of working-class communities across Northern Ireland. It is an organised effort to manipulate working-class communities as well and is something that needs to be challenged. The issues for working-class people are quite often shared, but whenever hateful rhetoric is used, it is easier to divide working-class communities against each other, instead of realising that the issues that they face are similar.

I am from a working-class background myself, and I find it appalling watching what is happening, and I am concerned about future unrest, but I will say that this is not the majority of people in Northern Ireland. It is a small group of people who are manipulating these groups, whether that is through paramilitary loan-sharking, gatekeeping of funding or other forms of threats and control. Whether it is through other manifestations of honour-based abuse or other different ways that they are using this to manipulate working-class communities, that is what it is about. It is rooted in poverty and deprivation, and it is the people who suffer the most poverty and deprivation who are forced into this sort of unrest.

Going on to the next point in terms of women's peace-building and participation, a lot of the women's sector has lost its funding recently. We are extremely underfunded, overworked and under-resourced. We are



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trying to undertake work that should be done by Government and statutory bodies but is not. We are receiving not only no thanks for it but little acknowledgment of the work that we are doing, in most cases. In the past seven months, the women's sector, through the Women's Policy Group, has responded to about 30 Government consultations, with no acknowledgment of the evidence provided within these, and no reflection of the evidence or views that we are giving coming out in the legislation that is being passed. Some of the clearest examples are our completely gender-neutral domestic abuse legislation and the refusal, so far, to implement a violence against women and girls strategy.

I really think that one of the main ways to address this is to acknowledge that grassroots women have already been doing this work from the bottom up, and have been doing it for decades. The issue is not grassroots women and their engagement; the issue is top down. There are two particular parts where Westminster could intervene and make a significant difference. The first is to follow through on the commitment to implement a Northern Ireland bill of rights, as promised in the Good Friday agreement, which the overwhelming majority of people voted in favour of. The second is to implement UN Select Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security. The women's sector has long tried to implement the four main pillars of this resolution, without any acknowledgment from the UK Government on it. For the UK Government to have a national action plan on women, peace and security and to not even acknowledge Northern Ireland as a post-conflict area is a complete failing.

A lot of these threats that we have repeatedly raised today in relation to economic and social rights could be better protected through a Northern Ireland-specific bill of rights, which has already been accounted for. There are already the grounds to do it. It can come from the Westminster level and then be implemented at a local, devolved level.

I will leave it there. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today, on behalf of the women's sector in Northern Ireland.

Elaine Croy: I want to agree with everything that Rachel has just said, but also to add on the issue of the orchestration of the unrest that we saw back in April. Low-level unrest is happening organically on a regular basis. What we saw in April was not organic. It was whipped up, it was designed and it was largely directed by people who we refer to as paramilitaries. Those people have far more control in some communities than they really ought to have 20-something years post the Good Friday agreement. Many people do not like calling them paramilitaries because they are not the same entities that existed during the conflict. That is something that our politics here is very nervous about addressing, for totally understandable reasons, but it is something that we need to reckon with in the long term, if we are ever going to have relative normality.



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On the issue of what to do next and how to address these genuine concerns that exist over the protocol, I would suggest using the model that Rachel alluded to and that has been used within the women's sector going back to the 1960s and 1970s. It can be done, because it has been done and has worked before. What it requires is not an outcome-focused process. These things take time. They involve detailed and sometimes awkward and painful conversations. Things might come up that relate to the past. They might even be hurtful. You need skilled facilitators who are not working towards to an outcome but are working on the process itself.

There are ways of addressing the issues that come out of the protocol that could have been implemented from the beginning. One way or the other, it is not going to be a discussion just about the protocol; it is going to turn into a discussion about Brexit, identity, the future and the past. These are the wallpaper of our lives here, and while we studiously ignore them a lot of the time, at some point we need to acknowledge that they are there. It can be done and there are people who are able to do it, but they are desperately underfunded.

I lost funding for the good relations work that I do a few months ago. Ironically, it was a proposal that we had put in, which was not funded, to legacy-plan for those women, like Eileen, who plan to retire in the next couple of years and who we will be learning from, to take on the next generation of good relations work. That was not deemed worthy of funding, and there you have, in a nutshell, the problem of the work we have done versus the appreciation level that it gets.

Eileen Weir: I am not going to repeat anything that Rachel and Elaine have said, because we are all singing from the same hymnbook when it comes to anything like that. I just want to point out that, in the riots that happened in Lanark Way on the Shankill and in Springfield Road, they were not even people who lived in that area who were rioting. These were people who came after social media had told them to be there at a protest.

I do not want our young people here to be labelled because of that one-off riot, which was orchestrated within the Shankill and Springfield Road. Our young people are fantastic. We have some fantastic young people coming through the ranks, so we do not need to label our young people. We have interface violence every weekend, but we need to give hope and job security to those people.

The education system has let them down, so forget about qualifications. They do not have them, so they think they have no worth. That has been a big problem here, right across this whole community: that if you do not have a qualification, you have no worth. We are telling people that they are no good, before we even give them a chance to do an apprenticeship or something good with their lives. We need to stop that conversation. Everybody has a worth, particularly our young people. We have three generations of unemployment here in the communities that I work



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across: great-grandfathers, grandfathers and fathers who have never worked. Our young people are coming through, and I do not want to see another three generations of unemployment for our young people coming through.

Chair: Eileen, thank you. I do not have any power as Chair, but if I did, I would exercise it now by saying that you are not allowed to retire. Yours is a voice of experience and wisdom that is absolutely needed to remember what happened and to shape what can occur. Eileen, you have left me with two indelible phrases. One was when you said, "We need hope", and the other was when you said, "All we want is a safe place to live". As politicians, if we all just kept those at the front of our minds, we would be very well advised.

Can I thank the three of you so much for joining us? Your insight has been invaluable. Your contribution has been interesting and informative. We have to try to find a way, as a Westminster Committee, without being tokenistic, to ensure that we can continue to provide an authoritative platform for us to hear what you have to say and your reflections on what is happening in your communities.

You are more than welcome to stay and listen to the second session of this meeting. I am sure that you will; I am sure you will want to hear what the next three have to say. Thank you again.