

# **Women's Platform – Written evidence (FUI0013)**

## **Submission of evidence to the Follow up Inquiry on the impact of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland**

### **House of Lords European Affairs Sub-Committee on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland**

**June 2022**

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#### **1. Introduction**

1. Women's Platform is the new identity for Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), which was the identity under which submissions to the original Inquiry were made. The new identity is designed to emphasise a focus on accessibility and diversity, but does not change our work or ethos. Women's Platform is a membership organisation working to promote the implementation of international human rights standards in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in line with commitments the UK has made to international human rights treaties. Established in 1988 as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, Women's Platform also represents women and girls in Northern Ireland at the European and international level, including at the UN. Women's Platform is in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN.
2. Women are a heterogeneous group with different views on issues including the Protocol and therefore Women's Platform is neutral with regard to the Ireland/Northern Protocol. The comments in this submission are made in this

context, with a focus on issues identified and experienced by women in the current situation.

3. The comments in this submission should be viewed as additional to those made in submissions to the original Inquiry in June 2021 and as a follow up in November 2021. Women's Platform welcomes the opportunity to update evidence, and would be delighted to provide further clarification on any of the points in this submission, should that be helpful.

### **Overview: Stability and engagement with communities critical**

4. Tensions remain high in Northern Ireland, and the election period as well as the events since the Assembly election have contributed to frustration and increasing anxiety among the public. Public priorities, as highlighted during the election period, are focused on the cost of living and addressing severe delays and challenges in the health system, and concerns are focused around this. However, the nature of public debate often makes it difficult for the public to disentangle and differentiate between issues relating to the Protocol and post Brexit arrangements, and issues arising due to global economic conditions.
5. Women are particularly affected by the cost of living rises, as women typically manage household budgets, and are also the main care providers within families. The impacts are particularly significant for women from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds, who have been struggling to provide for their families for some considerable time<sup>1</sup>. This has impacts on the physical and mental health of women, and also reduces women's capacity to engage with public life and public debate. As a result, public debate often overlooks the lived experience of women and families, thus not taking the opportunity to create a comprehensive picture<sup>2</sup>. The focus on what may appear as abstract discussion in public debate also serves to turn many women off engaging with it, which in turn further reduces opportunities for a diverse dialogue. In

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<sup>1</sup> See eg. Women's Regional Consortium (2019) [Impact of ongoing austerity: Women's perspectives](#)

<sup>2</sup> For detail on this, see Womens Policy Group (July 2021) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch one year on](#)

addition, the lack of information and discussion accessible to all opens up the potential for confusion and mixed messages.

6. The women's sector has consistently called for adequate representation of women in public debate as well as in negotiations related to the Protocol<sup>3,4</sup>. Women's Platform was pleased to see this clearly reflected in the Committee's report from the initial Inquiry, published in July. However, it is not clear that there has been any progress on this, and it would be important to impress on all stakeholders that an inclusive process is vital for a sustainable outcome.
  
7. Critically, there remains a clear need for engagement beyond professionals, with grassroots women and communities. Evidence from grassroots organisations emphasises that knowledge about the Protocol at community level is limited, which contributes to a sense of lack of control, in the current situation exacerbated by anxiety relating to the cost of living and instability not only in Northern Ireland, but across Europe and globally. Addressing this is vital in order to prevent and disrupt a vicious cycle of varying interpretations and increased unease that is very unhelpful for charting an agreed way forward.
  
8. Engagement with communities on their perspectives and experiences of life in Northern Ireland at present, and their ideas for a way forward, can go a long way towards easing tensions, building a basis of trust and identifying issues at the core of concerns, which include poverty and a sense of powerlessness, arising not least from the volatile political structures and developments in Northern Ireland. This can most effectively be achieved, in most cases, through existing mechanisms and in particular community organisations that communities are used to and confident dealing with. However, it would be essential to have a uniform approach to engagement and vital to ensure facilitators are independent and able to capture the full range of perspectives that may be presented. It is also essential to take a transparent approach and

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<sup>3</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch one year on](#)

<sup>4</sup> Also see previous submissions to the original inquiry by Northern Ireland Women's Platform (previous identity of Women's Platform)

be clear with communities about the remit for engagement. Communities in Northern Ireland are predisposed towards distrust towards authorities, and therefore a straightforward listening exercise, with feedback on results, can be vitally important in breaking this cycle.

9. It would be critical to ensure a clear mechanism for presenting evidence to negotiators and decision makers, and ensure participants can have confidence that their views are being listened to at the most senior levels. This is perhaps the most central recommendation in this submission, as an increased experience among communities that views are heard and taken into account could significantly strengthen confidence in the structures as well as process for developing a way forward. This might also provide a basis for further dialogue at local level, including discussion around reasons why engagement does not necessarily mean that all suggestions can be implemented.

### **Impact of current situation**

10. The impact of the Protocol to date has been mixed. As noted in the UK government's Command Paper, business trends are shifting. Northern Ireland has since been significantly affected by cost of living rises, including in the cost of electricity and gas, which has increased by a third just in recent months, following increases in 2021<sup>5</sup>. These rises are significant in particular considering that energy costs in Northern Ireland started from a higher base than elsewhere in the UK, in a context of overall lower incomes<sup>6</sup>.
11. Prices are rising on some goods, including a number of groceries, and some items have been periodically in short supply; the Protocol may affect deliveries, but the current situation is also inextricably linked to the shortages of staff and global logistics and supply issues. These impacts directly affect communities and families in Northern Ireland, and increase the pressure on low income households in particular.

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<sup>5</sup> See eg. Belfast Live 3 May 2022 '[Northern Ireland gas and electric prices: Latest breakdown on industry increases](#)'

<sup>6</sup> See eg. NEA (January 2022) [The impact of the energy crisis in Northern Ireland](#)

12. This, in turn, has a specific impact on women, as noted above. Women from low income backgrounds have reported significant stress and mental health impacts of trying to make ends meet over a considerable time, and frequently report forgoing necessities for themselves to provide for their families in challenging times, with diverse health impacts as well as social isolation as a result.<sup>7</sup> Debt is a major issue in low income communities across Northern Ireland, and women often carry the main responsibility for dealing with debt as well. This typically deepens negative impacts, which can further hinder women's ability to make choices in their own lives, including acting as a barrier to employment and engagement in society.<sup>8</sup>

13. The above highlights the complex chain of effects arising from trade, which include wider social and economic impacts. Currently, however, a significant issue in Northern Ireland is the lack of a functioning Assembly and Executive, which prevents local level action on key issues from health and childcare to employment and education. Northern Ireland has never had a childcare strategy, and caring responsibilities are the main reason why women leave or are unable to participate in the workforce<sup>9</sup>. Childcare costs are prohibitive for many families<sup>10</sup>, and rural places are very limited; the same applies to adult social care.

14. Women also play an important role in addressing tensions at community level, as well as building relationships across communities. However, this is rarely reflected in public dialogue, and contributes to a lack of engagement with public life, policy and decision making among women in disadvantaged communities in particular. Cuts to frontline services, including education and specifically support for children with special needs, further limits women's opportunities to engage in public life. It is therefore vital that Northern Ireland has a functioning democracy, with stable and inclusive institutions, in order to

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<sup>7</sup> See eg. Women's Regional Consortium (2019) [Impact of ongoing austerity: Women's perspectives](#)

<sup>8</sup> Women's Regional Consortium (February 2020) [Making ends meet: Women's perspectives on access to lending](#)

<sup>9</sup> NISRA (March 2022) [Women in Northern Ireland 2020-21](#)

<sup>10</sup> Employers for Childcare (November 2021) [Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2021](#)

enable development of policies and programmes that begin addressing the key needs affecting people living in Northern Ireland.

15. In addition, services constitute a significant part of international trade, and these issues remain outside the scope of negotiations. However, services also significantly impact on women's lives; above all, much of the service sector in Northern Ireland is female dominated with almost three quarters of employed women in this broad sector<sup>11</sup>, and any changes therefore disproportionately affect women. This has a particular significance in the border regions of Northern Ireland, most of which are rural and therefore have specific economic issues and challenges, while accessing services on a cross border basis has been commonplace over the last 20 years.<sup>12</sup> It is essential that these wider impacts are taken into account in analysis of the current situation.

## **A way forward**

16. NIWEP's previous submissions to the initial Inquiry emphasised the importance of implementing the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in full, as an international treaty. It also underlined the significant variation in views on the Protocol among women in Northern Ireland, while stressing that women across Northern Ireland have prioritised the Good Friday Agreement as a cornerstone of a rights based society and the origin of equality mechanisms including Section 75.<sup>13</sup> This remains the key position of Women's Platform.

17. Women have a long track record of peace building at grassroots level in Northern Ireland, and have shared this experience internationally, including through UN mechanisms. This work continues, and is increasingly emphasising dialogue and shared future priorities. A consistent theme is creating a better future for young people, which includes employment and education, and common themes also include action on violence against women and girls, the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Nearly half (48%) of employed women were employed within the "public administration, education and health" sector and a further fifth (19%) were employed within the "distribution, hotels and restaurants" sector'. NISRA (2020) [Labour Force Survey - Women in Northern Ireland](#), p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (2018) [Rural Voices](#)

<sup>13</sup> See eg. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (2018) [Rural Voices](#)

climate crisis and embracing diversity and intersectionality. The COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan developed jointly by the women's sector in Northern Ireland provides a comprehensive analysis of priorities for women, and emphasises women's participation and representation as a core requirement for change.<sup>14</sup>

18. Both the British and Irish governments have an important role to play in fulfilling the roles of guarantor for the Good Friday Agreement, and supporting the institutions in Northern Ireland. The current situation is both sensitive and volatile, and therefore an objective, systematic and issues focused approach is vital to chart and support a constructive way forward. It is particularly important to seek practical solutions, and emphasise the shared priorities of people across Northern Ireland. Longer term, it is vital to identify how a future impasse can be prevented, including through review of structures and mechanisms within Northern Ireland institutions.

19. In conclusion, the above emphasises the importance of creating stability and a clear way forward, based on the Good Friday Agreement. This can be achieved through dialogue and engagement with people in Northern Ireland on the widest possible basis, as outlined above. Triggering Article 16 of the Protocol, meanwhile, is likely to have the opposite effect, further compounding the challenges of the current situation. Decisions regarding next steps must therefore be based on a comprehensive analysis of the situation, and should be taken with a view to building a sustainable, inclusive future Northern Ireland that can play a constructive role on the world stage, in the short and long term.

20. Women's Platform would be pleased to expand on any of the points made in this submission, should that be helpful.

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<sup>14</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch one year on](#) and supplementary report [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#), which highlights women's first hand experiences of COVID-19 and their solutions.