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Feminist activism and the politics of crisis in Northern Ireland: Why gender sensitive analysis and policymaking must be a priority.

Evidence suggests that during political, economic and health crises gender equality concerns and the experiences of women and LGBTQ+ folks tend to be marginalized in favour of other political issues deemed of more urgency.

At the same time, the logic of crisis works to obscure or accelerate ongoing processes that undermine the social, sexual, cultural, and economic situations of diversely positioned women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

In Northern Ireland, we have seen these dynamics at play numerous times, from the unfinished gender politics of the Good Friday Agreement to the longstanding crisis of devolved political institutions and in the context of Brexit (Galligan 2019; Gilmartin 2019; Deiana 2018; Pierson 2018), as well as the challenges presented by the impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Our research project sought to investigate the implications of the current crisis on feminist activism and gender equality more broadly.

The Centre for Gender in Politics serves the growing community of feminist scholars and activists in international studies who apply a gendered lens to understand challenges in global politics. Research conducted at the Centre investigates the centrality of gender, in intersection with other categories such as race, class, sexuality and ability, in shaping local, national and global dynamics.

Key findings

Drawing on the experiences and knowledge of feminist and LGBTQ+ activists in Northern Ireland through focus groups, our findings indicate that:

- The current crisis is exacerbating ongoing challenges faced by women and LGBTQ+ folks in NI which have resulted from a long history of marginalisation and de-prioritisation of gender equality.
- These include lack of abortion services and functioning transgender healthcare, the lack of a childcare strategy which is exacerbated by the current pandemic, the current effects of Brexit and its anticipated material and human rights consequences for diversely positioned women and minoritised groups.
- The adversarial nature of Post-Good Friday Agreement politics continues to hinder the realisation of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. For example, the political divide or certain power-sharing mechanisms are mobilised to postpone or avoid political change.
- The impact of the most recent collapse of the NI Assembly has resulted in delayed implementation of key policies that are likely to have a gendered impact (e.g., Social inclusion strategy, budget, domestic violence). While in 2020 activists have been invited to engage in policy consultations, there is a concern that this engagement is not taken up in meaningful ways due to time-constraints imposed by a short-turn around and by a tendency to dismiss or pay lip service to feminist expertise.
- Activists have long expressed concerns with the use of gender-neutral

policymaking in Northern Ireland given the evidence that this further marginalises the interests of women and gender minorities.

- A key example of collective policy work undertaken by activists in response to the marginalisation of gender equality concerns is the Feminist Recovery Plan. The document outlines a series of detailed policymaking recommendations for a post-Covid19 recovery, addressing gender inequalities that remain in place, emerged anew or have been exacerbated by the current health crisis.'
- Women's groups, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activists have continued to organise collectively through online networks and responses to government consultations, as well as through mutual aid practices that have a long lineage in the history of feminist activism in Northern Ireland.
- The day-to-day reality of being feminist organizers while living through the uncertainties and complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges in terms of childcare, mental health, isolation and increasing working commitments. At the same time, the use of online platforms has expanded opportunities for activism for those living in rural areas, those with mobility issues and those without childcare support.

Areas for action

We highlight the following areas for action based on our research findings:

1. The pandemic has further entrenched gender inequalities in NI. These have been compounded by intersectional

inequalities and vulnerability on the basis of class, race, sexuality, ability etc. An approach based on gender neutral policymaking is detrimental to address entrenched gender, economic, social and cultural inequalities.

2. The NI government must commit to adopt gender sensitive and intersectional analysis and policymaking as a way to address the deeply gendered impact of the current crisis and longer -standing inequalities. It is imperative that government departments are fully trained to effectively enact this policy objective.
3. The expertise and knowledge of women's, feminist and LGBTQ+ groups in Northern Ireland must be recognized as vital for meaningful policy consultation and co-design. Concrete efforts must be made to engage with and support the ongoing work conducted by these organizations.
4. A sustained and long-term approach to funding the women's and LGBTQ+ sector is required.
5. While the process of policy consultation is a positive approach, an appropriate timeline and schedule must be ensured to enable meaningful responses and to avoid additional pressures on an already overwhelmed and under-funded sector.
6. The Feminist Recovery Plan for NI provides an extensive roadmap for gender sensitive and intersectional action in response to the challenges presented by the pandemic. This pioneering document presents extensive evidence-based recommendation in line with international best-practices. It is crucial that government departments make use of such robust evidence in crafting an

effective response to the challenges posed by the pandemic and reverse the continuous marginalization of gender equality commitments in government programmes.

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