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Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

There has been growing concern regarding inaction on gender equality for most of the last decade, and this has been exacerbated as the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly has not sat since 2017. Legislation, policy, and practice on gender equality in Northern Ireland lags behind provisions elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and addressing this is a key recommendation in the concluding observations from the examination of the United Kingdom under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in February 2019. Political will, and resourcing, is required to ensure that the government meets its international obligations, in particular under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals and in implementing the principles of Security Council Resolution 1325.

I. Inclusive development, shared prosperity, and decent work

There is no visible commitment to gender equality in public policy in Northern Ireland. While Northern Ireland's gender equality strategy 2006-2016 theoretically remains in place, no further review or consultation has been published and there is no evidence that the gender equality strategy had impact on policy.

A draft programme for government that was published in 2016 was not formulated around the governments' international human rights obligations. There was a lack of a gendered perspective and the opportunity was not taken to strengthen mechanisms for achieving equality. While there is a provision in the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 for reporting on the gender pay gap, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Assembly, the legislative process is stalled.

Women continue to be overrepresented in part-time, low-paid, and precarious work. One third of women are economically inactive, with the most common reason being family and caring commitments. The median weekly pay for women overall was £246, compared to £449 for men.

Lack of affordable childcare is a major barrier to employment for women. In addition, the social care system in Northern Ireland is severely underresourced, resulting in higher levels of unmet need and pressures on unpaid carers and paid workers alike.

We ask that gender equality is put at the heart of global development policy, by highlighting the links between Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5 and 8 on poverty, gender equality, and decent work and economic growth.

II. Poverty eradication, social protection, and social services

The government's austerity and welfare reform agenda continues to have a disproportionate impact on women, with specific additional impacts on women in Northern Ireland. Reforms were implemented without regard to the contextual factors that increase women's vulnerability to poverty in Northern Ireland, including the issues referenced in the previous section. Poor connectivity and limited access to jobs and services particularly disadvantages rural women.

Women experience the impact as mothers and carers, as disproportionately reliant on benefits, and as greater users of public services, as well as the majority of the public-sector workforce.

We ask that that social protection of women and girls is made a key priority by:

- Protecting access to public services

- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in policymaking, including:
 - o Robust gender impact analysis
 - o Gender budgeting
 - o Tackling gender stereotypes in education and employment

III. Freedom of violence, stigma, and stereotypes

Gender-based violence and stereotypes based on traditional gender roles remain prevalent in Northern Ireland society. Conservative attitudes are particularly prominent in rural communities, further affecting women's opportunities to control their own lives.

Legislation on coercive control and stalking is stalled and only a small proportion of rape cases go to trial, with even fewer resulting in a conviction. The domestic violence policy is gender-neutral. A review of serious sexual violence case handling was undertaken in 2018, following a high-profile rape trial and has recommended action in law, procedure, and practice.

i. Violence against women and girls

Structural inequalities in Northern Ireland are reflected in high levels of gender-based violence. In addition, gender-based violence during the conflict is still impacting many women. While recent research indicates that two decades of peace has improved victims' experience of accessing protection, some communities remain hostile to police, leaving women without recourse to justice or support. This research also found a strong link between domestic violence and poor mental health, with one in four women reporting that they had attempted to take their own lives and one in two reporting suicidal thoughts.

ii. Health care

Reproductive health care in Northern Ireland is poised for significant change. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 includes a provision to decriminalise abortion and legalize abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. This was achieved following a long civil society campaign and an inquiry under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which found the current situation is a grave violation of women's human rights. The pending provisions were legislated for at Westminster, following long-term failure to act at the Northern Ireland Assembly level. Provision for the service is being developed, in line with the legislative requirement to have a service in place by March 2020.

Mental health is a significant issue for women in Northern Ireland, with welfare reform, the legacy of the conflict and gender-based violence among the key factors driving demand for mental health services. There are very limited perinatal mental health services.

We ask that tackling gender-based violence be prioritized globally through implementing international obligations, such as the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. We also ask that reproductive health care is emphasized as part of the Sustainable Development Goals and the right to the highest attainable standard of health.

IV. Participation in public life, accountability and gender-responsive institutions

In 2017, the proportion of women elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly increased to 30 per cent. Also, three of the main parties were led by women. However, this remains the lowest proportion within the four devolved administrations in the United Kingdom. Female representation in local government is 25 per cent.

No political party has used the legal provision that allows for lawful positive action in the selection of candidates. There has been no introduction of temporary special measures, as recommended by Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2008 and 2013. There has been some progress with regard to public appointments, with women's representation on public bodies reaching 41 per cent (a 7 per cent increase since 2010). However, only 23 per cent of boards are chaired by women (a decrease).

The austerity agenda of recent United Kingdom governments has reduced funding for the women's sector, leading to reduced capacity for advocacy and policy work streams of the sector.

V. Peaceful and inclusive societies and the impact of Brexit

There has been little progress toward increasing women's participation in peacebuilding. Extensive consultation with women has found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out. This was confirmed in a Westminster Inquiry (2014) reviewing the implementation of the Security Council Resolution 1325 in Northern Ireland, which concluded that regression was inevitable without robust intervention. A toolkit was developed in 2014 by civil society to assist public authorities, but appears to have had little impact to date.

A report following the Fresh Start Agreement in 2016 noted concerns that women's role in community development and public decision-making is undermined by paramilitary influence. Limited action has been taken; a support programme was introduced but has not yet been evaluated.

As the only land border between the United Kingdom and the European Union, Northern Ireland faces particular issues linked to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit), which are causing significant concern among women. These include health, social and employment protection, social care and education provision issues, as well as matters related to securing peace. A central priority identified by women is to safeguard the Good Friday Agreement. There is also concern that Brexit will weaken cross-border collaboration of police forces, with impacts for victims of violence and trafficking. Research demonstrates that the nature of prostitution and trafficking in Northern Ireland involves women moving or being moved frequently across the border.

We ask that continued focus is put on effectively engaging women in peacebuilding and decision-making by:

- Prioritizing implementation of the principles of the Security Council Resolution 1325
- Embedding Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender equality throughout all the Sustainable Development Goals.