



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how far the world is from gender equality, and the very limited influence women still have on decision making, in all countries and societies. UN Secretary-General António Guterres demonstrated this by calling the pandemic ‘a hidden war on women’, drawing specific attention to violence against women and girls. However, the crisis did not create these inequalities. Rather, it has deepened persistent inequalities, and highlighted the structural social and economic causes of these inequalities as well as the lack of political will to take action. Now more than ever, urgent action is required to ensure women and girls do not pay the price for the crisis through a dramatic speeding up of the roll back of rights and opportunities already in motion across the globe.

In Northern Ireland, at local authority level 25 per cent of Councillors are women. In the devolved regional Assembly, 30 per cent of elected representatives are women, a trend of slow increase. Six of ten Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive are women and three of these are leaders of their parties, including the First and Deputy First Ministers who lead the two largest political parties in Northern Ireland, DUP and Sinn Féin. However, this does not translate to action in support of women and gender equality, or local level inclusion of women. For example, there is no representation of the women’s sector in taskforces dealing with response to COVID-19, and very few women are involved in taskforces even as representatives of their sector.

Development of a new Gender Strategy was given approval by the Northern Ireland Executive only in late 2020, although the previous strategy formally expired in 2016. There is no strategy on violence against women and girls; rather, there is an explicitly gender-neutral domestic violence strategy. Funding for domestic violence services has been cut drastically over the last decade of austerity. There is also no visible commitment to implementing the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The only publicly visible initiative is a cross party All Party Group on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Women, Peace and Security in the devolved Assembly. However, All Party Groups have no formal powers and exist primarily to build capacity.

Women’s participation is a central theme in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which also marks its 20th anniversary in 2020. In Northern Ireland, equal participation in decision making has been a central aim of the women’s movement since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which included the Women’s Coalition as a co-signatory. The Good Friday Agreement also is the linchpin that gender equality in Northern Ireland rests on, as key current provisions rely on the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that directly flowed from the Agreement. However, there is little evidence of significant progress, and this has been the case since before the current coronavirus pandemic. Representation of women on the boards of public bodies has not changed for a significant period, and only a quarter of boards are chaired by women. Issues affecting participation are lack of childcare, application processes and criteria disadvantaging women, and lack of role models and confidence. Meanwhile, funding for women’s education programmes has been largely dismantled in recent years, with very few leadership programmes at grassroots level remaining. Temporary measures are enabled in law, but have never been used; this has been noted on a number of occasions by the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. An inquiry by the Assembly into quotas within political parties in 2015 found the proposal unworkable in a Northern Ireland context and made no binding recommendations. There is no protection in law for women in Northern Ireland in respect of sex discrimination by public bodies when carrying out their public functions.

Gender based violence is another significant factor affecting women's participation. One in four women in Northern Ireland experience violence in their lifetime, and this figure is persistent, while funding for services for victims and survivors has been cut particularly over the last decade of austerity. In 2018-19, the main service provider Women's Aid Northern Ireland had to turn away 381 women seeking refuge, while access to permanent, suitable housing is a major issue and a barrier for many women to leave. There is specific concern about women and people with no recourse to public funds, who typically are people with non-permanent or insecure immigration status and the majority of whom are women of Black and minoritised backgrounds. Trans and non-binary people face significant challenges in accessing services, including prejudice and discrimination in how services are structured as well as in cultural attitudes.

Northern Ireland also lacks legislation in place elsewhere in the United Kingdom. For example, coercive control is not criminalised, there is no stalking legislation and modern slavery legislation is stalled. A Domestic Abuse Bill is currently going through the regional devolved Assembly, but this is limited in scope and includes for example a 'reasonableness' defence and excludes provisions on non-fatal strangulation as well as protection for children under 18 for whom the perpetrator is a guardian.

At community level, there is anecdotal evidence that women's prominent role in maintaining communities during the conflict has been actively rolled back, while many women today have limited influence even within their own families. On a positive note, recent research indicates that women experiencing gender-based violence feel more able to report violence to police, while women also are less fearful of illegal guns being used against them. More worryingly, however, local surveys indicate that many women feel unable to get involved in their communities not only because of gender based violence, but also due to continuing paramilitary influence in some communities. This is associated with practices such as illegal lending and control of community initiatives, which can have violent outcomes including forcing women unable to pay debts into prostitution or violent reprisals against young people involved in behaviour deemed unacceptable; sometimes also against children of indebted women and families. Limited action is taken to address these issues, which due to their very sensitive nature also are difficult to record and formally quantify.

Overall, women in Northern Ireland have not yet fully seen a 'peace dividend', particularly with regard to participation and power parity. In addition, today Northern Ireland stands at a crossroads: COVID-19 is fundamentally reshaping economic and social conditions as well as practices for participation, while the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union is likely to deepen challenges across society. Positive change is possible, but the key requirement to achieve change is strengthened political will and commitment to gender equality. The conservative culture in Northern Ireland affects public debate as well as policy and decision making at all levels, and hampers both implementation of international instruments on women's rights, and debate on the social and economic implications of gender equality. Focus therefore needs to be on highlighting and addressing the barriers to women's participation and gender equality, while supporting women to engage and promoting positive role models.

International women's rights mechanisms and commitments are important in shaping national and local level responses, and the agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women will contribute to the future climate of debate regarding women's participation. It is important that the specific role and experience of women, in their unique role as individual citizens rather than members of families, remains at the forefront of this debate. Language must also remain specifically focused on women and gender equality, as this is critical for supporting advocacy at

national and local levels, particularly in the context of a challenging fiscal and policy environment. At international level, it is also important to safeguard space for civil society, as a means for highlighting good practice and common issues affecting women, to enable sharing and learning that in turn promote international solidarity and collaboration.

For Northern Ireland, the Sustainable Development Goals provide a helpful framework that enable highlighting the value and importance of gender equality across pillars and spheres of life. Strong endorsement of the Goals will provide a basis for national and local level advocacy, which can help strengthen women's participation in ways bedding the way for power parity.

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