

Country Update

Northern Ireland

(February 18, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of February 18th 2021, Northern Ireland has registered 109,488 cases of COVID-19, including 2,009 deaths. As of this week, nearly 450,000 vaccine doses have been administered to the public. On December 26, new lockdown measures were implemented to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. On February 18th, it was announced that the lockdown would be extended for a second time until April 1st, exempting elementary school students. This lockdown involves school closures, no large gatherings, and citizens needing a “reasonable excuse” to leave the home.

As a part of the COVID-19 response plan, some citizens qualify for the non-repayable Discretionary Support self-isolation grant. Those who qualify are primarily from low income households, and are required to self isolate. As part of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, eligible businesses can claim so of their employee’s wages. Moreover, the government has introduced the Employment Wage Support Scheme (EWSS) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) with aim to mitigate the damage of lost income and employment.

Summary of impact:

Between the months of September and November, the unemployment rate rose to 3.7% and is expected to rise once the government brings wage support to an end. As of November 11th 2020, the total job losses came to 9,600 in Northern Ireland due to restrictions imposed by the Executive. While Northern Ireland’s unemployment rate is still below that of other

countries in the UK, experts fear that the long-term unemployment rate will be devastating for the country's citizens and economy.

Northern Ireland's Health Minister Robin Swann has led much of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the good amount of vaccine rollouts, Minister Swann is committed to have many restrictions potentially stay in place until next year, 2022.

Like in most other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland has affected men and women in different ways. Indeed, it has further reinforced the pre-existing inequalities that women suffer from daily. Moreover, these inequalities are deepened for black and minoritized women, women with disabilities, and the LGBTQI+ community. Women have been the most impacted by the economic effects of the pandemic due to their disproportionate representation within high-risk sectors, such as the medical response teams. Indeed, women make up 76% of all healthcare workers in Northern Ireland, putting them at higher risk of infection.

In January 2021, a report on COVID-19 and gender written by MEP for Dublin Frances Fitzgerald was adopted by the European Parliament. This report highlighted the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women, and listed many recommendations with aim to protect women's rights and continue to work towards gender equality in post-pandemic times. MEP emphasizes the importance of considering the intersections of structural inequalities in shaping the response to COVID-19. Policy must be shaped to factor in the various barriers and challenges faced by those with intersecting vulnerabilities.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

In Northern Ireland, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the role of women's movements in response to crisis. Despite the circumstances, women-led organizations have been able to maintain high levels of coordination and effective collaboration, and have been able to quickly adapt to virtual modes of work for peace. The Women's Policy group has been a key organization highlighting the importance of the women's movement, with their development of the Feminist COVID-19 Recovery Plan.



The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) is incredibly important for the gender-inclusive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Formal institutions like the NIHRC must be involved in policy-making in order to ensure a strategy that protects and promotes women's rights in this time of crisis. Despite women's involvement in peace processes in Northern Ireland, they have been continuously excluded from high-level decision making, including from the country's COVID-19 task forces.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, women peacebuilders from Northern Ireland have worked to draw attention to the silence surrounding gender-based violence. They have highlighted the need for mental health support and trauma counselling for victims of sexual violence, a form of violence that has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland have drawn attention to the lack of government financial support given to small businesses, as economic recovery has primarily been centred on helping large corporations stay afloat. This approach to economic relief fails to take into account the disproportionate representation of women in small businesses and the informal employment sector.

