



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

Launch of Violence Against Women Group's Report on Social Security

12 June 2019

There are 80 incidents of domestic violence reported a day in Northern Ireland, with many more un-reported. Yet, in Northern Ireland, there is no statutory definition of violence against women, coercive behaviour, stalking and upskirting are not criminalised, and there is no statutory requirement to gather and monitor disaggregated data on this issue. Specialised services, such as refuges, are also inadequately resourced. Effectively addressing these issues are vital for the protection of women and are required by the Istanbul Convention.

Social security reforms are having a negative effect on women in Northern Ireland, particularly victims and survivors of violence and abuse. These reforms increase the risk of women living in or facing the threat of poverty. This is particularly concerning, as some of those faced with increased poverty in Northern Ireland due to these reforms are turning to illegal and unregulated paramilitary-operated lending, which can lead to threats or actual violence for non-repayment.

Despite efforts by the devolved Department for Communities, for example the Make the Call helpline, accessibility remains an issue for obtaining

social security benefits. This includes over-reliance on on-line interactions, lack of practical support for navigating the system, challenging documentation requirements and bureaucratic delays. This particularly affects migrant, disabled and rural women.

In Northern Ireland, separate Universal Credit payments to an individual partner are permitted in exceptional circumstances. Domestic violence is a recognised exception, but the burden is on the claimant to declare their circumstances. The existence of this exception is also not clear within departmental guidance. Currently separate payments are practically unavailable, as the computer system is not able to process such requests. They should be to ensure women are not facing increased poverty.

The two-child tax credit limit increases family and child poverty. It may lead to women having terminations under economic duress. This is a particular issue in Northern Ireland, where terminations are illegal, except where necessary to preserve the life of the mother; including where there is a risk of a serious and adverse effect on her physical or long-term mental health. Consequently, in majority of cases women in Northern Ireland have to travel for access to legal terminations. Lady Hale has stated that “relying on the possibility that [a woman] may be able to summon up the resources, mental and financial, to travel to Great Britain for an abortion, if anything, makes matters worse rather than better”.

The rape exception to the two-child limit also places the mother at risk of retaliatory violence and re-traumatisation. It risks stigmatising the child. Furthermore, law in Northern Ireland obligates anyone that is aware of a crime to report it or face prosecution. Despite guidance that this is unlikely, fears remain that the non-reporting of a rape declared through this process will lead to prosecution of victims and their support networks. The two-child tax credit limit should be repealed.

It cannot be ignored that these issues are continuing in a time of political uncertainty and stagnation in Northern Ireland, due to the suspension of our devolved institutions. The growing ineffectiveness of our laws and policies and the harrowing effect on women and their families are more evident by the day.

Northern Ireland does not have up-to-date gender equality or childcare strategies. There is also an unhelpful move towards gender-neutral policies.

Unlike the rest of the UK, there is no publicly funded childcare provision in Northern Ireland.

The existing social security reform mitigation package in Northern Ireland expires in March 2020. This exposes affected women to poverty, if steps are not taken to extend the existing package.

Paramilitaries are also taking advantage of the political void. Women within the affected communities live in fear of such groups. Intimidation (which includes threats to life) is preventing women from accessing funding, engaging with peace initiatives and being empowered.

The longer the status quo continues, the issues that need addressed are expanding and becoming more difficult to remedy. Attempts are ongoing to restore devolution, but as the Women and Equalities Committee state "devolution does not remove the UK Government's own responsibilities to comply with its international obligations and internal laws cannot be used to justify a failure to comply with human rights standards".