

**Submission of evidence in relation to UK and EU proposals on the Protocol
on Ireland/Northern Ireland
House of Lords European Affairs Sub-Committee on the Protocol on
Ireland/Northern Ireland**

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1. Introduction

1. NIWEP is a membership organisation working to promote the implementation of international human rights standards in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in line with the international obligations of the UK. Locally, NIWEP coordinates representation of the women's sector in Northern Ireland within UN human rights processes and builds the capacity of the sector to utilise international human rights standards in their own work to strengthen gender equality. Acting as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, NIWEP also works to amplify the voice of women and girls in Northern Ireland internationally.
2. Women are a heterogeneous group with different views on issues including the Protocol and therefore NIWEP is neutral with regard to the Ireland/Northern Protocol. The comments in this submission are made in the context of this and the commitment to a rights based society now and over the longer term. The comments should, further, be viewed as additional to those made in a previous submission in June 2021. NIWEP welcomes the opportunity to provide additional evidence.

Engagement with communities critical for progress

3. Tensions remain high in Northern Ireland, and public dialogue on the Protocol is not creating clarity for people in Northern Ireland. Lack of clarity and clear information is contributing to uncertainty and associated anxiety among the public. This is compounded by ongoing uncertainty in the context of COVID-19, and there appears to be strong demand for factual information setting out both the Protocol itself and proposals of both the UK and the EU in layman's terms.
4. The women's sector has consistently called for adequate representation of women in the dialogue as well as in negotiations related to the Protocol. NIWEP was pleased to see this clearly reflected in the Committee's report from the initial Inquiry, published in July. NIWEP also finds it positive that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has developed ongoing dialogue with civil society around these issues, which has recently included a number of representatives for the women's sector. The EU also engaged with civil society, including women's organisations, during the visit of EU Parliament Vice-President Maros Šefčovič in September. It would be important for both parties to demonstrate how these perspectives are taken into account in negotiations, as this is not evident at present.
5. Critically, there remains a clear need for engagement beyond professionals, with grassroots women and communities. Evidence from grassroots organisations emphasises that knowledge about the Protocol at community level is limited, which contributes to a sense of lack of control and events happening 'to' people in Northern Ireland, rather than 'with' people. This, in turn, can easily underpin a vicious cycle of varying interpretations and increased unease that is very unhelpful for charting an agreed way forward, in the context of COVID-19 recovery and developing a future Northern Ireland.

6. It would be very helpful to see development of clear and direct mechanisms for engagement with communities on their perspectives and experiences of life in Northern Ireland at present, and their ideas for a way forward. This could be done in a number of ways and would not necessarily require extensive participation from senior government representatives; in many cases, engagement might be more effectively organised through existing mechanisms and/or community organisations that communities are used to and confident dealing with. However, it would be essential to have a uniform approach to engagement and vital to ensure facilitators are independent and able to capture the full range of perspectives that may be presented.
7. It would be critical to ensure a clear mechanism for presenting evidence to negotiators and decision makers, and ensure participants can have confidence that their views are being listened to at the most senior levels. This is perhaps the most central recommendation in this submission, as an increased experience among communities that views are heard and taken into account could significantly strengthen confidence in the structures as well as process for developing a way forward. This might also provide a basis for further dialogue at local level, including discussion around reasons why engagement does not necessarily mean that all suggestions can be implemented.

Impact of current situation

8. The impact of the Protocol to date has been mixed. As noted in the UK government's Command Paper, business trends are shifting. Northern Ireland was also less affected than the rest of the UK during the recent fuel shortages¹, but conversely, many companies have stopped deliveries to Northern Ireland. Prices are rising on some goods, including a number of groceries, and some items have been periodically in short supply; this is also inextricably linked to the shortages of staff and global logistics issues. These impacts directly affect communities and families in Northern Ireland, and increase the pressure on low income households in particular.
9. This, in turn, has a specific impact on women, as women typically manage household budgets in Northern Ireland, and rising cost of living therefore puts pressure above all on women. Women from low income backgrounds have reported significant stress and mental health impacts of trying to make ends meet over a considerable time, and frequently report forgoing necessities for themselves to provide for their families in challenging times, with diverse health impacts as well as social isolation as a result.² Debt is a major issue in low income communities across Northern Ireland, and women often carry the main responsibility for dealing with debt as well. This typically deepens negative impacts, which can further hinder women's ability to make choices in their own lives, including acting as a barrier to employment and engagement in society.³
10. The above highlights the complex chain of effects arising from trade, which include wider social and economic impacts. In addition, services constitute a significant part of international trade, and these issues remain outside the scope of negotiations. However, services also significantly impact on women's lives; above all, much of the service sector in Northern Ireland is female dominated with almost three quarters of employed women in

¹ See eg. BBC News Northern Ireland 27 September 2021 '[Fuel supply: No issues in Northern Ireland, industry body says](#)'

² See eg. Women's Regional Consortium (2019) [Impact of ongoing austerity: Women's perspectives](#)

³ Women's Regional Consortium (February 2020) [Making ends meet: Women's perspectives on access to lending](#)

this broad sector⁴, and any changes therefore disproportionately affect women. Services also shape women's ability to participate in society: access to healthcare, child and adult social care often determine women's ability to take up employment and/or remain in full time employment.⁵ This has a particular significance in the border regions of Northern Ireland, most of which are rural and therefore have specific economic issues and challenges, while accessing services on a cross border basis has been commonplace over the last 20 years.⁶ It is essential that these wider impacts are taken into account in analysis of the current situation.

A way forward

11. NIWEP's previous submission to the initial Inquiry emphasised the importance of implementing the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in full, as an international treaty. It also underlined the significant variation in views on the Protocol among women in Northern Ireland, while stressing that women across Northern Ireland have prioritised the Good Friday Agreement as a cornerstone of a rights based society and the origin of equality mechanisms including Section 75.⁷ This remains the key position of this submission.
12. Women have a long track record of peace building at grassroots level in Northern Ireland, and have shared this experience internationally, including through UN mechanisms. This work continues, and is increasingly emphasising dialogue and shared future priorities. A consistent theme is creating a better future for young people, which includes employment and education, and common themes also include action on violence against women and girls, the climate crisis and embracing diversity and intersectionality. The COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan developed jointly by the women's sector in Northern Ireland provides a comprehensive analysis of priorities for women, and emphasises women's participation and representation as a core requirement for change.⁸
13. In conclusion, the above emphasises the importance of creating stability and a clear way forward, based on the Good Friday Agreement. This can be achieved through dialogue and engagement with people in Northern Ireland on the widest possible basis, as outlined above. Triggering Article 16 of the Protocol, meanwhile, is likely to have the opposite effect, further compounding the challenges of the current situation, including COVID-19 recovery and taking action on the climate crisis, as being agreed at the COP26 at the time of writing. Decisions regarding next steps must therefore be based on a comprehensive analysis of the situation, and should be taken with a view to building a sustainable, inclusive future Northern Ireland that can play a constructive role on the world stage, in the short and long term.
14. NIWEP would be pleased to expand on any of the points made in this submission, should that be helpful.

⁴ 'Nearly half (48%) of employed women were employed within the "public administration, education and health" sector and a further fifth (19%) were employed within the "distribution, hotels and restaurants" sector'. NISRA (2020) [Labour Force Survey - Women in Northern Ireland](#), p.8.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 4. for further analysis, also see Women's Policy Group (2021) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch one year on](#)

⁶ Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (2018) [Rural Voices](#)

⁷ See eg. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (2018) [Rural Voices](#)

⁸ Women's Policy Group (2021) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch one year on](#) and supplementary report [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#), which highlights women's first hand experiences of COVID-19 and their solutions.