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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Nevertheless, they persisted. feminist activism and the politics of crisis in Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

The gendered effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have been documented globally by feminist researchers and activists. However, less explored are the strategies employed by feminist activists to navigate such challenges. Mobilizing feminist scholarship on the politics of crisis and the study of feminist movements, this article presents findings from a collaborative research project that sought to understand how the crisis engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on feminist activism in Northern Ireland (NI) post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Drawing on focus groups with local activists, we outline how the effects of the pandemic compound the long history of marginalization and de-prioritization of gender equality and justice seen throughout the peace process and its multiple crises. We trace how the activists who participated to this study have continued to organize collectively through online networks, gender-sensitive policy recommendations, proposals for a comprehensive recovery plan, as well as through mutual aid practices that have a long lineage in feminist activism amidst the conflict and in NI's unfinished peace. The context of NI offers a valuable case study to trouble the temporalities and boundaries of global crises, deepening our understanding of feminist strategies for collective organizing in complex political terrains.

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## Introduction

During political, economic and health crises gender equality concerns and the experiences of gender minorities tend to be marginalized in favour of other political issues deemed of more urgency. Evidence tells us that the logic of crisis works to obscure or accelerate ongoing processes that undermine the social, sexual, cultural and economic situations of diversely positioned gender minorities individuals. At the same time, during these moments of crisis and rupture feminist activists mobilize different strategies, whether taking advantage of windows of opportunities for engaging with institutional actors and processes (Anderson & Gillies, 2018), using digital activism (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Tabbush & Friedman, 2020), expressing more ambitious feminist demands for radical change (Cullen & Murphy, 2021) or imagining alternative ways of being in the world (Ticktin, 2021). Feminist scholars and activists have drawn attention to the intensification of these dynamics in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Combining feminist scholarship on the politics of crisis and analyses of feminist mobilization, this article presents findings from a collaborative research project that sought to understand how feminist activists are responding to the crisis engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland (NI), post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This context is insightful for such exploration as

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women's groups, feminist and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) activists in NI have always navigated a complex political terrain, from the decades of conflict through the multiple political crises that ensued after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The challenges presented by the pandemic compound the unfinished gender politics of the peace process and the systematic marginalization of gender equality concerns seen in the longstanding crisis of devolved political institutions, as well as more recently in the context of Brexit (Deiana, 2018; Galligan, 2019; Gilmartin, 2019; Pierson, 2018). At the same time, precisely because of a longstanding history of feminist organizing in a complex political and economic terrain, grassroots organizations have developed important strategies and situated knowledge to navigate this moment.

## Methods

Our research practice is informed by intersectional feminist methodology (Tickner, 2005), with particular attention to being reflexive about our positionalities as the researchers doing this work. All three of us are researchers navigating multiple identities inside and outside the university. Both Roberts and Deiana had previous working relationships with all the activists interviewed. Roberts role as a Policy and Development officer at HereNI, a group that empowers, supports and advocates for all lesbian and bisexual women and their families, as well her work with the Belfast Feminist Network and Alliance for Choice informed our research. Both Deiana and Hagen have a commitment to continue working with these activists in community as co-directors of the Centre for Gender in Politics which has a stated mission 'to engage with policymakers and sustain connections with the wider community of feminist and LGBTQ activists and cultural organisations in Belfast and beyond' (Centre for Gender in Politics 2021). These previous relationships were important in establishing trust from those activists we invited to this project. Indeed, this project is a continuation of our collective conversations about feminism and the Politics of Crisis in NI that began in November 2019.

Our research is motivated by the premise that despite ongoing crises, feminists persist. The phrase came into prominence in 2017 as a viral hashtag #NeverthelessShePersisted responded to the silencing of Elizabeth Warren speaking out against President Trump's appointment of Jeff Sessions to the U.S. Attorney General (Wang 2017). Our use of this framing is also an acknowledgement of the transnational dimension of feminist organizing activism in NI, engaged in global feminist discourse. The project findings thus contribute to ongoing critical feminist engagements with the politics of global contemporary crises, interrogating explicit and unanticipated effects on feminist activism.

Given our interest in examining collective strategies, we conducted online focus groups to enable a shared reflection between participants while allowing us to gather multiple perspectives on the topics under investigation (Montell 1999).<sup>1</sup> As a classic tool within feminist research, small focus groups can prove fruitful for gathering rich qualitative data on a given topic, while also providing a space of reflection for activists (Munday, 2014). A key advantage of this method is that it creates opportunities for the co-construction of meanings (Wilkinson, 1998). On the other hand, collective conversations might prevent participants from expressing dissenting or antagonistic views (Munday, 2014). Given that our participants are already part of existing groups that regularly work together we felt that the advantages of this method outweighed this issue. Of course, we are aware that questions of dissent and exclusion are important in examining feminist movements, but addressing group dynamics as such goes beyond the confines of this research. We have identified participants by focusing on organizations that have contributed to the Feminist Recovery Plan for NI, an impressive document outlining gender-sensitive and intersectional policymaking in response to the COVID-19 Crisis (Women's Policy Group, 2020). The Recovery Plan was the result of extensive consultation and research led by the Women's Policy Group (WPG) and the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), two umbrella organizations representing the women's sector inclusive of LGBTQ groups.<sup>2</sup> Other participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The activists who were able to join the focus groups have been involved in activism across various feminist and LGBTQ issues with groups including Belfast Feminist Network, Reclaim the Agenda, Alliance for Choice, WRDA, and

TransgenderNI.<sup>3</sup> Based on participants availability we hosted four focus groups with activists online in early 2021. The focus groups were hosted online in MS Teams using our institutional credentials to maximize privacy. We decided to limit our discussions to approximately one hour given the increased care and work commitments, as well as online fatigue, brought about by the pandemic especially for women as participants and researchers involved in this project. A total of 10 activists participated in the focus groups. While the participants are based in Belfast (9) and in Derry (1), the organizations they represent have a wider membership that spans geographically across NI. Many of the participants have been visible in public discourse in their personal capacity, as well as through professional roles, but we did not seek out activists in leadership positions as such. The insights discussed here provide a snapshot of how the group of activists who participated in our study make sense of and respond to this moment of crisis. While participants' involvement in feminist activism reflects extensive links and collaborations with other women's groups and feminist organizations, we do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of women's and feminist activism in NI. We see this research as complementing ongoing documenting efforts such as the previously mentioned Feminist Recovery Plan. We believe that gathering the perspectives of activists who have long navigated NI's multiple crises adds important nuances to existing studies (O'Keefe, 2021; Thomson, 2019).

We designed the semi-structured focus groups to maximize opportunity for dialogue. We asked participants to reflect on three broad questions: whether they would perceive continuities between the pandemic and the multiple crises experienced before; what collective strategies they have developed to sustain feminist activism in these complex moments and what challenges for the realization of feminist demands for social transformation remain in place, emerged anew or have been exacerbated by the current health crisis. The focus groups conversations yield rich material<sup>4</sup> and activists expressed different positions on several themes that emerged in the discussion, such as on Brexit, on the constitutional question, and on the issues and approaches that they wanted to prioritize in their activism/work. We coded the interview transcripts thematically, focusing on the following threads:

- Temporality, that is how participants made sense of this moment of crisis in relation to long-standing gendered processes at the core of NI's politics.
- The role of institutionalized structures, that is how participants navigate the NI political context and engage with institutional actors.
- Horizontal organizing, that is the everyday experiences of being an activist and coalition strategies developed in the pandemic.

These major thematic ideas were derived from our literature review. Given our objective of examining both the impact of multiple crises and feminist responses to it, we refined the analysis by identifying excerpts that convey participants' views on political conditions, strategies for participation and relationships. Other salient subcategories emerged from the data, for example the emotional impact of the pandemic. We selected relevant paragraphs, paying attention to both descriptive and latent content and, subsequently, identifying significant quotes to be included in the discussion of our findings (Gibbs, 2007; Saldana, 2021). In the next section, we situate our paper within feminist scholarship on the politics of crisis. We then outline the history of women's and feminist activism in navigating the complex political context of NI. In the final section, we outline our findings on the politics of coalition-building and strategic feminist activism in response to ongoing gendered challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 emergency.

### **Feminist perspectives on the politics of crisis**

Narratives of the current crisis engendered by the global COVID-19 pandemic, in the media and political discourse have revolved around the trope of unprecedented times. It is evident that the emergence of the novel COVID-19 virus has presented new challenges in terms of public health,

political and economic measures necessary to reduce the spread of the virus. However, a closer look to feminist scholarship on the politics of crisis indicates that the framing and effects of current crisis governance mirror a range of dynamics that have been long documented from a variety of feminist perspectives. Broadly speaking, feminist work in sociology and political science questions the tendency to conceptualize crises as bounded or discrete events occurring in isolation from contextual and ongoing social processes (Ahrens et al., 2018; Dustin, Ferreira, & Millns, 2019; Griffin, 2015; Guerrina & Murphy, 2016; Hozic & True, 2016; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Otto, 2011). Consequent to this more complex understanding, feminist perspectives on crisis management and response challenge conventional 'wisdom' that envisions temporarily bounded measures that will lead to a return to 'normal'. Feminist critical interrogations challenge the language and governance of crisis, highlighting existing gendered hierarchies and thus problematizing the very idea of normality to begin with (Motta, 2020; Otto, 2011). Relatedly, feminist scholars caution against the gendered (un)anticipated effects of measures emerging from such rationalities, advocating for crisis responses as a catalyst for societal and political transformation. Overall feminist work complicates the boundaries and temporalities of crises understood not as isolated events but as 'multiple and overlapping phenomena that are enmeshed and embedded within each other to a significant extent' (Branicki, 2020, p. 880).

Feminist work demonstrates how the rationalist logic of crisis management and governance has long reproduced militaristic and utilitarian approaches that have tended to reinforce gendered hierarchies (Otto, 2011). Transposing such aggressive and utilitarian approach to pandemic responses tends to privilege short term, top down and measurable interventions that while helpful in temporarily curbing the infection, have negative effects for groups that are already marginalized, such as certain women, as well as racialized and feminized communities. This is because the invocation of crisis mode tends 'to omit considerations of pre-existing structural disadvantages' (Branicki, 2020). As such, dominant crisis responses are likely to entrench hegemonic views and restrict the space for alternative visions. This is far from new. From analyses of the global financial crisis to Brexit, feminist scholars have drawn attention to crises as a form of governance and control that tends to marginalize women's/feminist perspectives (Ahrens et al., 2018; Griffin, 2015; Guerrina & Murphy, 2016; Hozic & True, 2016; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). In this instance, conceiving the pandemic as isolated and 'unprecedented' has meant that feminist knowledge and lessons learned from previous outbreaks were marginalized or simply ignored. Feminist literature on global health has long documented the centrality of gender in addressing pandemics and global emergencies (Wenham et al., 2020). Yet, state responses have generally failed to deploy gender-sensitive lenses.

As a result of the marginalization of feminist insights and analysis in favour of populist 'waging war' metaphors and slogans such as 'we are all in this together', policy choices have had disproportionate gendered costs. These have been compounded by intersectional inequalities and vulnerability on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc. Despite calls from feminist advocates, there has been a delayed attention to collecting and studying disaggregated data on the primary and secondary effects of the virus (Wenham et al., 2020). Furthermore, the insistence on the use of lockdowns has meant an increase in domestic violence against women, as well as LGBTQ folks worldwide (Harman, 2020). School closures and the impact of the virus on the elderly have increased the burden of care on women (Johnston, 2021; Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020). Furlough and job losses have disproportionality impacted women and other feminized racialized groups who are more likely to be employed part-time or in sectors affected by the economic shutdown and border closures, such as retail and hospitality (Motta, 2020). Those at the forefront of pandemic response face challenges on multiple fronts: Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage, extremely demanding working hours, as well threats and abuse (often gendered and racialized) by COVID-19 deniers and anti-restrictions groups. There is evidence that the pandemic and the unfolding crisis governance has had serious implications that threaten provisions in the area of sexual and reproductive health (UNFPA, 2020), as well as in the context of transgender healthcare (Keane, 20202020;

Koehler et al., 2020). While there is considerable variation in state responses, conservative governments have consistently used the pandemic as an opportunity to roll back or delay reproductive rights and services for trans communities (Harman, 2020).

Feminist engagements with the politics of crisis are not only concerned with documenting the material destruction and deleterious gendered effects, but also with envisioning potentialities for ethical reordering and transformation (Hozic & True, 2016). Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has also been a moment of intense feminist scrutiny and activity with important interventions in institutional, activist and scholarly spaces. While the analysis of feminist responses and mobilizations is still ongoing, scholars have highlighted important dynamics that can help us understand how feminists mobilize in these complex moments. Rather than invoking a return to normal, feminists have been at the forefront of demands for change in current responses, as well as in re-imagining ways out of the pandemic as documented by feminist recovery plans developed globally.<sup>5</sup> A study on the Republic of Ireland has shown how activists have built on knowledge developed in other moments of crisis to make demands for transformation that are innovative and attentive to the connective tissues of multiple crises (Cullen & Murphy, 2021). Evidence from Latin America indicates that feminist groups have engaged with institutional spaces, while using transnational networks to galvanize digital activism and online protests that multiplied across borders (Tabbush & Friedman, 2020). At the same time, grassroots activism has been repurposed in multiple ways through mutual aid and other creative practices of prefigurative politics (Ticktin, 2021). In this sense, this moment of crisis can be viewed as a complex phenomenon whereby challenges for inclusion, equality and social justice remain in place and arise anew. Concomitantly, we also see the convergence of consolidated strategies and new feminist approaches to remap crises which adds important nuances to the ongoing study of feminist social movements.

In the next section, we turn to the context of NI. We outline how existing analyses of feminist and women's activism offer important insights that can help us unpack continuities and opportunities that shape the terrain for feminist coalitions and collective demands.

## Feminist and Women's activism in Northern Ireland

Arguably women's and feminist activism in NI has always been in crisis; from organizing and actions during the decades of conflict and in the peace talks, throughout subsequent collapses of the fragile devolved political institutions, in the fallout from Brexit and the current pandemic. During the conflict and in the aftermath of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, welfare reform, access to abortion, and women's security have remained high on the priorities of feminist and women's groups in NI. Along with these concerns there have been attempts to build an inclusive and intersectional feminist movement not only across the ethno-national divide<sup>6</sup> but also to include marginalized groups more generally.

With the formation of the NI assembly and the establishment of power-sharing mechanisms following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the main source of crisis became political instability rather than conflict and violence. Irrespective of the window of opportunity for women's inclusion during the peace talks, gender equality and women's rights receded as a priority in the fractious political environment that ensued, also as a result of the consociational nature of power-sharing that entrenches the ethno-national basis of politics (Anderson & Gillies, 2018; Deiana, 2013; Kennedy, Pierson, & Thomson, 2016). This has been coupled with the gendered effects of austerity and welfare reforms and uncertainties about peacebuilding funds that had supported certain women's groups (Deiana, 2013; Pierson, 2018). Despite scarce funding, women's centres in Belfast's working-class areas and groups across NI have continued to offer safe spaces for women in areas still affected by the entrenchment of male-networks of power, paramilitary activities and high-levels of violence.

Beside the formal women's and NGO sector, newly founded grassroots groups have emerged, such as Alliance for Choice, a feminist group of activists who have campaigned for abortion access since 1996. Additionally, the collective Reclaim the Agenda and Belfast Feminist Network (BFN) both

formed in 2010. These groups have an explicit political agenda that revolves around feminist collective mobilization and a broad membership that extends beyond ethno-national affiliations. Since its inception, Reclaim the Agenda has worked as an umbrella group to challenge the setbacks on women's economic and personal security, the shrinking resources and spaces for women and feminist activism and, generally the false promise of prosperity brought about by the so-called peace (O'Dowd, 2014). These grassroots groups have mobilized different strategies to navigate a complex, male dominated political context hostile to demands for gender equality, keeping feminist demands in the public eye (Thomson, 2019). Besides working in partnership with the formalized women's sector, as well as with LGBTQ organizations such as the Rainbow Project and Stonewall UK, grassroots activism has expanded its reach in multiple ways, from protests to cultural events and social media. Important contributions have also been made in more informal networking with LGBTQ individuals who report continued concerns about institutional prejudice, a need for institutional reform, a need for policing reform and concerns over violence at the hands of paramilitaries (Ashe 2019).

The conservative and fractious nature of post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement politics has precluded change in the context of reproductive rights and LGBTQ equality. Yet, campaigners have also used moments of crisis as opportunities to bypass the devolved institutions and mobilize international human rights frameworks to lobby Westminster on abortion and marriage equality.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, these collective efforts eventually led to the decriminalization of abortion through an act of the British parliament and to the extension to marriage equality to NI.

Since 2016, women's and feminist groups have raised concerns about the implications of another moment of crisis in Brexit,<sup>8</sup> for example around the land border with Ireland, threats to citizenship rights enshrined in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and human rights more generally. Yet again, such perspectives were mostly marginalized in institutional spaces with a focus on renewed tensions exemplified by threats against customs workers (O'Neil 2021) and episodes of violent protest and rioting, with comments from DUP politicians indicating that they will 'bring down Stormont' should their political demands not be met (Stone 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic in NI has, thus, posed additional challenges to an already fractious and contentious environment that activists navigate.

## Remapping the crisis through feminist activism

### *NI in perpetual crisis*

The focus groups indicate the complexity of dynamics at stake when thinking about the politics of crisis in a context such as NI. Participants highlight the interconnections between the current situation and the multiple, unresolved crises that have characterized NI politics since the Good Friday Agreement. There have been five suspensions of the NI Assembly, lasting from one day to four years, with subsequent re-negotiations of the peace settlement.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal saw the return of the NI Assembly after a collapse which lasted three years. The instability of Stormont has contributed to delays in implementation, revision and decision-making on important policy issues such as the Gender Equality Strategy. While the issue of pandemic governance takes centre stage, the effects of 'routine' political deadlock and division continue to reverberate with important implications for gender minorities. The adversarial nature of post-Agreement politics continues to hinder the realization of feminist and LGBTQ rights. For example, this is visible in the mobilization of the ethno-national divide or the misuse of certain power-sharing mechanisms to postpone or avoid political change.

As others have noted, irrespective of the frustrating lack of attentiveness to feminist demands, activists continue to engage in formal political processes (Thomson, 2019). The impact of the most recent collapse of the NI Assembly is being felt acutely by those in the women's sector, who have been inundated with government consultations and the development of Social Inclusion strategies mandated by the NDNA which must all be completed before the Assembly dissolves for the

upcoming election in early 2022. Rachel Powel, Women's Sector Lobbyist, spoke about the pressures of increased workload stemming from the absence of local government for three years, on issues of great importance including the Bill of Rights, the Budget and Domestic Violence and Abuse. 'After three years of the assembly being collapsed, we're just dealing with an unprecedented amount of legislation being rushed through without proper opportunity to consult on it or engage with women and see what their views are on it. If we had a normal five-year term they [Stormont] would probably be more flexible'.<sup>10</sup>

While activists recognize the importance of responding to consultations on policies that are likely to have gendered effects, they are also concerned that the urgency of the process in the midst of the crisis response will not allow for a thorough input. In this context, gender analysis and consultation with women's and LGBTQ groups might fall victim to the legacy of the recent political crisis, as well as to ongoing divisions that have long characterized post-Agreement politics and policymaking. In a sadly familiar move, apportioning blame to the 'other side', offers an opportunity to avoid taking responsibility in addressing the issue. Emma Campbell co-convenor Alliance for Choice Belfast spoke about parties using issues for 'point scoring' against each other. Powell offered an example of this when noting how concerns about the lack of appropriate consultation with women's groups were met with criticism by Sinn Féin of the DUP, rather than addressing the issue of an overwhelmed women's sector.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing issue of abortion services is another example that illustrate the complexities of crisis politics in NI. Even though October 2019 marked the decriminalization of abortion in NI through an act of the British Parliament and the reinstatement of devolved institutions paved the way for abortion law reform, the road to abortion healthcare has been fraught with delays due to ongoing political deadlock and ideological resistance (Alliance for Choice, 2020). The extraordinary circumstances brought about by the spread of COVID-19 have further compromised the prospects for reproductive rights and abortion healthcare availability.

While England, Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland all have rolled out Telemedicine, this has not been the case in NI. At the time of writing the Department of Health has yet to facilitate abortion access with important implications for those needing to access abortion in a safe environment. Campbell explained, 'with flights cancelled due to the pandemic, the only option for those in need of abortion became an eight-hour freight ferry. Clinics were under pressure due to staff illness and redeployment, and the supply of decriminalised abortion pills was disrupted for both manufacturing and postal reasons caused by the pandemic'. This made travelling which was a 'kind of safety net or safety valve much harder to access and much more dangerous for people and also made it much more of a public health concern'.<sup>12</sup>

As these examples illustrate, the challenges brought about the pandemic are deeply intertwined with the complex political and institutional scenario of post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement NI in ways that, yet again, compromise the gains achieved through both strategic engagement and creative grassroots activism. Remapping the politics of crisis in NI through feminist lenses, thus, demands that we understand the current crisis not as an isolated event, but rather as an entanglement of intersecting phenomena which not only (re)produce gendered effects, but also add pressures to women's, LGBTQ and feminist groups.

### *Feminist organizing in times of crisis*

Participants reflected on how, given the complex history of activism in NI, the LGBTQ and feminist movements have in some respect always been operating 'in crisis mode'. This has led to the creation of partnerships valuable to navigating a political environment hostile to feminist demands for political change.

For example, the creation of 'secret networks' in the context of reproductive rights has provided an important safety net for those needing abortion access throughout the decades, as well as in light of recent developments. As Maeve O'Brien from Alliance for Choice Derry points out, 'activists and



medics, who are conscientiously committed to providing services, are used to working under very restricted, confined parameters'.<sup>13</sup> In the context of COVID-19 this form of partnership continues to offer support. In a sense, as O'Brien suggest, the pandemic emergency has worked to strengthen such networks even further: 'we've really continued our activism and have linked up more strongly in a way that maybe might not have happened had the pandemic not created this really urgent situation'<sup>14</sup>.

However, other participants also discuss how the pandemic adds to the challenges of doing activism in an already hostile environment. Alexa Moore of Transgender NI argues, 'Doing this work is hard for all the organizations from the feminist movement, some LGBTQ groups, trans groups. It is an incredibly hostile environment, generally speaking, within which to do this work and throw in a pandemic and loneliness and isolation and the kind of you know, mental health issues that come with that. I know for a fact that I haven't been as productive as I was before the pandemic, and I couldn't'.<sup>15</sup> Moore continued that this is especially challenging when working on issues that have not seen much movement and been in crisis for the past three years. For example, access to gender affirming services has seen no progress since 2018, with no new patients receiving transgender health care and a lack of willingness to even do interim or harm reduction measures informed by trans communities in NI. 'They waited two years to set up a review, and then COVID hit'.<sup>16</sup>

As Brexit negotiations were ongoing and the UK entered the first lockdown in March 2020, women's and feminist groups were quick to respond through community mutual aid as well as more formal lobbying for recovery. For example, many women's centres and broader sector organizations responded to the pandemic by repurposing resources to provide food parcels and everyday supplies. As mentioned, the WPG and the WRDA began organizing to issue collective recommendations on the crisis response. As a result, in July 2020 the WPG launched the Feminist Recovery Plan for Northern Ireland. The document outlines an extensive evidence-based roadmap 'to advocate for a feminist recovery to COVID-19 with the aim of not only avoiding deepening gender inequalities through recovery planning, but also tackling the gendered inequalities that already exist in our society' (Women's Policy Group, 2020, p. 7).

Powell spoke about the WPG's rationale for developing the Feminist Recovery Plan seeing how the response to the pandemic has reproduced marginalization and de-prioritization of women's experiences. In her assessment, women's experiences 'aren't the priority at the minute, as [the government logic goes] we're in an emergency, we have to deal with COVID', highlighting how 'the issues that existed beforehand have been made worse because of COVID and if you want to try and find a solution, you can't ignore the pre-existing issues and the levels of gender inequality'.<sup>17</sup>

### *Engaging with institutional actors*

Push-back and co-optation are always a concern with the mainstreaming of gender politics in institutional spaces and the pandemic response is no exception. Participants reflected on the ways this has happened historically in NI as the result of the conflict and currently in light of COVID-19. Helen Crickard and Alexa Moore both spoke of the side lining of work to address gender, using COVID-19 as an excuse or defence of this unwillingness. In agreement Moore continued that the pandemic has served as, 'the next in a line of excuses'<sup>18</sup> and way to obfuscate taking action on gender affirming health-care as well as abortion access. Feminists also point to this current moment of crisis as revealing the lack of institutional spaces for women to create change. Structural limitations in the community sector create a 'ceiling' to women's meaningful engagement, particularly as women tend to work on part-time contracts from a position of precarity.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, several participants spoke about a trend when dealing with civil servants and politicians that words like 'gender lens' and 'intersectionality' were being used, even though there was doubt that this was any more than lip service. Connor spoke about hearing politicians using language feminists have been using for years. Connor noted that people do seem to be more aware

of issues regarding abortion access, but words like intersectionality when used by civil servants and politicians become more of a buzzword than a practice. Powell agreed, arguing 'in Northern Ireland there's been a real lack of willingness to even engage with intersectionality, and it's not that they don't know how to do it, because how many studies have they commissioned on working class Protestant boys? You know, they understand what intersectionality is, they just need to be able to apply it to other forms of intersectionality as well'.<sup>20</sup>

The Feminist Recovery Plan has been used extensively to lobby the NI executive and foreground the women's sector demands. For example, it has now been used by the All Party Group on Women Peace and Security 1325<sup>21</sup> and has formed the basis for a number of questions from MLAs, while the former First Minister Arlene Foster had signalled awareness of the report (NI Assembly 2020). However, in line with the history of continued marginalization of, and resistance to, feminist demands, there is no clear indication that the plan has been taken seriously and translated into action by policymakers. The lack of engagement has led the WPG to re-launch the plan with updated qualitative and quantitative evidence on the gendered impact of the pandemic in July 2021 in an attempt to ask for accountability (Women's Policy Group, 2021).

A frustration was also expressed about not having those who work in feminist politics have their expertise recognized. There was a concern by several participants about how despite being invited to engage in consultations for the LGBTQ strategy and the Gender Strategy, this engagement is not taken up in meaningful ways. Relatedly, there are limitations for how under researched issues relevant to these strategies can be included given the high standard of evidence required. Moore notes, 'Trans communities are incredibly under researched in Northern Ireland, especially trans led research is just not done at all'.<sup>22</sup> This indicates that even though there might be new windows of opportunity for engagement, feminist knowledge and demands are still neglected.

### *Living a feminist life in pandemic times*

In speaking with participants, we also asked them to reflect on the day-to-day reality of being feminist organizers while living through the uncertainties and complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The feminist organizers spoke of the importance of being able to collaborate across organizations to take on issues together as becoming increasingly important, especially as organizers are faced with isolation due to the pandemic and burn-out because of the state of crisis regarding so many feminist issues in NI.

Collective organizing during the pandemic comes with positives and negatives. Alexa Moore explains that while it is challenging to engage with elected officials over email and zoom, moving meetings online has broadened participation. 'The move to Zoom helps people from different areas geographically in NI. It enables us to engage more readily with our rural service users, with folks outside of the urban centres'.<sup>23</sup> Moore acknowledged that those in rural areas may have been less likely to participate in consultations in the past when meetings about this were held in the city. Beyond the challenges of having to work through digital media to politically organize, there are also limitations on a visceral and emotional level. Crickard notes, 'You don't realize how much energy you get from meeting people in a room and having that direct contact'.<sup>24</sup> A related challenge while everyone is working remotely is finding ways to invite new people to activism which participants noted is easier to do when people can meet for in-person events and organizing.

Despite the crisis, feminist activists are still trying to ensure their practice is intersectional, and to address the needs of those most marginalized. For example, by drawing on particular members expertise, and organizing seminars for reflection the WPG aimed to create space for discussion and gather evidence. For activists in the Northwest this also means working across the border and paying attention to how different communities might be affected by the current moment of crisis, as well as by the uncertainties surrounding Brexit. As Maeve O'Brien points out: 'we would keep an eye on very much on End Deportations as well. And the racial profiling that's going on. For example, if a migrant

woman or someone in direct provision needs assistance, you know it's difficult for them to get across the border'.<sup>25</sup> In this context, activists for reproductive justice necessarily work through an intersectional and cross-border approach.

Creating online community spaces to continue to connect during the isolation of the pandemic has been a key issue across all of the organizations we spoke with. For Transgender NI, funding remains a key concern. Moore explained, 'Sustainability in terms of staffing, resourcing, funding is absolutely essential. It is one of our biggest priorities'.<sup>26</sup> There is also a challenge of not leaving anyone behind facing COVID-19 anxiety and returning to public spaces after lockdown lists. This is especially important when it comes to finding ways to continue to engage with those people from rural areas who have only recently been able to become engaged in feminist organizing because of the online events and resulting accessibility. Online spaces were also important for Connor and Campbell who have organized training sessions and organizing meetings online. Campbell notes a silver lining in that the move to online has allowed more people to participate in feminist activism, as travel and childcare are no longer barriers, but also that an online space can be less daunting for a newcomer to join than a physical one.<sup>27</sup>

Crickard and Moore reflected on the challenges of burn out as feminist activists working harder than ever during the pandemic. Transgender NI is confronting this is by making sure to delegate activities so not everyone is doing the policy work and support work within the organization. Moore also noted the importance of making time for 'buffer zones' between meetings to decompress and the need to schedule this time as well. Prioritizing time to have check-ins with colleagues and supporting each other was also mentioned as important, especially for small organizations involved in so many different projects. Crickard explained that this can be challenging in the age of social media when there is a feeling that activists always need to be proving their worth. 'We're punishing ourselves. We're doing too much. We're not looking after ourselves'.<sup>28</sup> Moore argued that collectivizing responses to issues like the Hate-Crime Review in NI through the WPG is also an important way to confront the burn-out of those working to bring forward what can otherwise become siloed agendas.

## Conclusions

Our research with feminist and LGBTQ activists in NI resonates with existing feminist work that troubles the temporalities and boundaries of global crises. From the perspective of our research participants, we cannot think about crisis in singular. The pandemic has exacerbated ongoing challenges facing gender minorities emerging at the intersection of the post-Agreement fractious political environment and fragile institutions, the ongoing history of feminist issues' marginalization in institutional politics and the gendered implications posed by Brexit. Such challenges include a continued resistance to implement abortion services which has compromised safe access to reproductive rights in the context of the restrictions imposed to curb the infection. Activists also point to the lack of a functioning transgender healthcare, a childcare strategy and a gender-based violence strategy, which have been exacerbated by the current pandemic. Concerns also remain about the current effects of Brexit and its anticipated material and human rights consequences for gender minorities and other minoritized groups.

Women's groups, feminist and LGBTQ activists have responded to ongoing challenges through a variety of collective strategies. The long history of relationship building has provided a good foundation for responding to crisis, be it an international network helping secure access to abortion pills, or a coalition of experts coming together to write the Feminist Recovery Plan. Likewise, the importance of recognizing difference, in relation to needs and experiences, was raised by our participants. At the same time, participants spoke about the need to address activists' burn out caused by the increasing demands for urgent responses and mobilizations, as well as by a sense of isolation induced by multiple lockdowns. The expertise of local activists adds insights to the study of both established and innovative forms of feminist activism in the context of crises, as well as to ongoing research on feminist recovery post-pandemic.

Finally, while all participants were aware of the challenges posed by the complex effects of the pandemic, they also view this moment as an opportunity to make demands for radical change. Powell remained somewhat hopeful about what can be learned from the current crisis. 'The pandemic showed that we can't survive without care ... this needs to be a turning point in what our priorities are in a society, and we need to firmly put care at the core of our economy and all investment decisions, and that links to climate change'.<sup>29</sup> Crickard explained that for her, it is important to keep it simple when persisting in this work as a feminist. 'It all comes down to valuing women. That is the key message we need to get out there'.<sup>30</sup> By shining a light on the contribution of unpaid and underpaid women's work, foregrounding diverse women's expertise and situated knowledge, and sustaining collaborative networks, feminist and LGBTQ activists in NI insist that the recovery from the pandemic must provide for a new attitude in policy making. In this sense, they are part of global feminist demands that envisions potentialities for ethical reordering and transformation through crisis (Hozic & True, 2016).

## Notes

1. The study received ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics, Queen's University Belfast (application no. 201205, Approval date:04/12/2020). A letter of information describing the aims and objectives of this project and informed consent form were provided to all the participants before any information was collected. On completion of our research, a draft of this manuscript was sent for review to all participants. Participants were given the opportunity to confirm or withdraw consent to the study. All the participants have confirmed their consent.
2. The WPG is a platform for women working in policy and advocacy roles in different organizations to share their work and speak with a collective voice on key issues. It is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organizations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organizations, LGBTQ organizations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organizations and individuals.
3. These are: Helen Crickard, Emma Campbell, Elaine Crory, Rachel Powell, Alexa Moore, Naomi Connor, Maeve O'Brian, Jill McManus, Robyn Scott and Sarah Laverty.
4. For example, critical reflections on the use of gender-neutral politics and its exclusionary effects on gender minorities. We unpack this theme in another publication associated to this project (Hagen, Deiana, & Roberts, 2022).
5. See the Feminist Recovery Plan project, hosted at the University of Warwick. <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/feminist-recovery-plan/Resources>
6. The ethno-national divide in NI is between the protestant/unionist/loyalist and catholic/nationalist/republican communities. There was a period of violent conflict from the late 1960's known colloquially as 'the Troubles'. While largely concluded with ceasefires and the subsequent Belfast / Good Friday Agreement peace accord in 1998, community tension and violence continue, all be it at a lower level. For more information see <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/>
7. Given that the UK government is the body responsible for international Treaty obligations, such as CEDAW, and has the power to act to uphold human rights, this emerged as the only political avenue for change in the absence of a functioning NI Assembly.
8. A referendum on the UK's membership of the EU was held in 2016, with the UK leaving the Union after a protracted negotiation in 2021. While NI voted slightly in favour of remain, 56% to 44% (BBC 2016), The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which made up the majority of NI MPs in Westminster, was staunchly pro-Brexit.
9. In 2006 with the St. Andrew's Agreement and in 2014 with the Stormont House Agreement.
10. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
11. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
12. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
13. Interview Recording 1 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 02.02.2021.
14. *ibid.*
15. Interview Recording 3 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 14.01.2021.
16. Interview Recording 3 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 14.01.2021.
17. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
18. Interview Recording 3 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 14.01.2021.
19. Interview Recording 1 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 02.02.2021.
20. Interview Recording 2 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.

21. The group created to raise awareness of the lack of participation of women in political and public life in areas outlined in UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview Recording 3 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 14.01.2021.
24. Ibid.
25. Interview Recording 1 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 02.02.2021.
26. Interview Recording 3 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 14.01.2021.
27. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
28. Ibid.
29. Interview Recording 2 (2021) 'Feminist activists in Northern Ireland' 19.01.2021.
30. Ibid.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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