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Impact of austerity on North East women highlighted at UN

A Northumbria University PhD student has gone to Geneva to lobby the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Clare Wiper, a Sociology PhD student, joined a delegation of women from the North East Women's Network seeking to hold the UK government to account for their responsibilities to tackle all forms of violence and discrimination against women.

The trip is in response to the Network's recent report that revealed rising levels of female unemployment, public sector redundancies, together with elements of welfare reform in the UK, are hitting women in the North East much harder and increasing their financial dependence on men. Edited by Dr Ruth Lewis, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Northumbria University, the report's findings have been presented to North East MPs and policy makers.

Northumbria University has funded Clare's UN visit as it relates to her PhD work examining the impact the cuts are having on the women's domestic violence sector in the North East.

She said: "The austerity measures are making women more vulnerable to domestic violence and, at the same time, are removing the support services that women rely on in these situations.

"Women are consequently slipping through the widening gaps in the welfare system and becoming more marginalised as a result."

Clare is in the process of interviewing forty activists and workers from women's refuges and support services across the North East to gain an understanding of the complex challenges currently facing women's organisations. When complete, her research aims to produce recommendations for ways to strengthen the women's domestic violence sector in the region.

"By providing essential support services and advocacy over the last four decades, the women's voluntary sector has built up tremendous knowledge and expertise," Clare added.

"Research shows that a strong autonomous women's movement is essential for improving responses to forms of violence against women. I'm concerned that the movement is now becoming fragmented due to lack of time and resources.

"The women I have spoken to are concerned that too much time is now being spent competing with other women's organisations for a decreasing pot of funding, rather than working in collaboration with these organisations to enhance best practice. Overcoming this tension is a key priority for everyone."

Sue Robson, co-ordinator of NEWomen's Network, an organisation that works to sustain women's organisations and services and champion women's rights, said: "There is a looming crisis in gender inequality in the North East which will inevitably have devastating economic and social consequences; not just for women, but for children, families and communities.

"As a signatory to CEDAW the UK Government should be putting measures in place to alleviate these impacts."

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